

**THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES  
IN THE LIVES OF SIERRA LEONEANS  
AT CAMPBELL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

A Professional Project

presented to

the Faculty of

Claremont School of Theology

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

by

Daniel Gbundema

May 2019

© 2019

Daniel Gbundema

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED



This professional project completed by

**DANIEL GBUNDEMA**

has been presented to and accepted by the  
faculty of Claremont School of Theology in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

**Faculty Chairperson**

Rev. Dr. Lincoln E. Galloway

**Dean of the Faculty**

Rev. Dr. Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook

May 2019

## **ABSTRACT**

This work seeks to examine how spirituality and religious identity helped immigrants from Sierra Leone to survive and flourish as they bridge the divide between their native country and the United States.

Many Sierra Leoneans had experienced and witnessed a harrowing history of national calamities and tragedies including wars, political upheaval, religious persecutions and diseases. Throughout the past several years of my residency in California, I encountered immigrants from all provinces of Sierra Leone, some who were ardent, fervent, and passionate Christians, and others from different religious backgrounds. Many of these immigrants wished to continue their religious practices in the United States but had no space or platform to do so. A growing number of Sierra Leoneans found a welcome at Campbell United Methodist Church and were able to demonstrate their strong religious commitment. It became clear that there were religious beliefs and practices that shaped their daily lives, and that phenomenon became a motivating factor for this research project. I was motivated to discover how these spiritual practices enabled Sierra Leonean immigrants to survive and flourish.

In this work, I primarily sought to explore the spiritual journey of people whose families have emigrated from Sierra Leone to the United States. I used a small sample of persons who are members of the Campbell United Methodist Church. I discovered that in spite of present uncertainties or past struggles their religious and spiritual practices have shaped who they are and remain central to their identity, and remain at the core of their personal narratives and their daily lives.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### **With gratitude**

To my wife Sia Mahoney Gbundema whose grace and patience have blessed me over the years and for her support even as she and our children were transitioning to the United States.

To my friends and colleagues past and present in ministry at Campbell UMC: Richard and Roberta Corson, Alan and Linda Pickens-Jones, Jim Mishler, Paul Kim (Late), Kathi McShane, and Ouk-Yean Kim Jueng, whose efforts and time in developing the African Ministry at Campbell United Methodist Church cannot be forgotten.

To Larry LaPierre and his wife Jane, retired UMC pastors from the New England Conference whose invaluable contributions have made possible my doctoral work and encouraged my thesis every step of the way.

To Roxanne Kohlin, for helping with church archives and Barbara Wade, Campbell United Methodist Church administrative secretary for editorial assistance.

To Tamba Tugbawa (Chair of African Ministry at Campbell since 2016) and members of the African Ministry at Campbell United Methodist Church without whose contributions this work would not have been possible.

To the people of Campbell United Methodist Church for all that they did financially, spiritually, and morally, to continue to develop me as a pastor.

To all the professors at Claremont School of Theology especially those who taught the courses in “Spiritual Renewal, Contemplative Practices, and Strategic leadership.”

And last, but not the least, to Professor Lincoln E. Galloway, my project advisor for taking time to read my work and to guide my research project to completion.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Introduction	1
The problem or Issue	1
Significance of the Problem	1
Context of Ministry	2
Campbell United Methodist Church	3
A Brief Introduction to the Republic of Sierra Leone	6
Immigrating to the United States of America	8
Sierra Leoneans at Campbell United Methodist Church	9
Chapter One: Religion and Spirituality	12
Summary	17
Chapter Two: Spiritual and Religious Beliefs in Sierra Leone before Christianity	18
God	23
Divinities and Ancestral Spirits	24
Spirit	25
Magic and Medicine	26
Chapter Three: Biblical and Theological Foundations	32
Stories of Migration and Suffering	32
Stories of Hope for the Future	37
The Way of Compassion	39
Chapter Four: The Research Project	41
Preparing for the Conversation	42
The Plan and Development	42
Complications	44
Chapter Five: Discussion and Analysis	47
Part One: Selection of Participants	47

Analysis of Selection Process	48
Part Two: Stories of Participants	51
Story One	51
Story One Analysis	53
Story Two	55
Story Two Analysis	56
Story Three	58
Story Three Analysis	59
Story Four	61
Story Four Analysis	62
Story Five	63
Story Five Analysis	65
Chapter Six: Some Common Trends	68
Religious Identity	68
Church Sponsored Education and Missionary Activities	69
Hospitality	70
LGBTQ	71
Migration	72
Effects of the War	72
Chapter Seven: Sierra Leoneans Involvement & Ministries at Campbell UMC	74
Music	74
Hospitality, Prayer and Care	75
Memorial Services	75
United Methodist Women, “Virtuous Women” Circle	75
African Epiphany Service	76
Bible Study and Sunday School	76
Chapter Eight: Concluding Thoughts, Application and Recommendations	77
Appendix I: Letter of Informed Consent	80



Appendix 11: Discussion Questions	84
Appendix I11: Maps, Figures, and Tables	85
Bibliography	86

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **The Problem or Issue**

This work seeks to examine how spirituality and religious practices help immigrants from Sierra Leone survive and flourish as they bridge the divide between their native country and the United States.

### **Significance of the Problem**

As an indigene of Sierra Leone and a participant observer in this research, I developed great passion for this work because it resonates with my current ministry as a pastor. The experiences of Sierra Leoneans described in this project may serve future students or pastors who would like to have more information about Sierra Leoneans' spiritual and religious practices at Campbell United Methodist Church. This work may serve as a springboard to do future works on the spirituality and religious practices of Sierra Leonean who have migrated to the United States. Furthermore, this work will serve as a resource for the church and can be used to assess and determine Sierra Leonean participation in the present and the past at Campbell UMC. It could also be used to make adequate plans for future evangelism in the Sierra Leone community.

The primary audience for this work is Sierra Leonean immigrants who comprise 90% of West African immigrants who gather for worship on Sundays and other days for worship and for other spiritual exercises at Campbell United Methodist Church. It is my hope that this work will be an educational piece not only for Sierra Leoneans at Campbell United Methodist Church but also for other members who would like to learn about Sierra Leonean religious and spiritual practices at Campbell United Methodist Church. It is my hope that this work will continue to serve the needs of other people like teachers, Sunday school teachers, committee chairs, office staff, pastors and parishioners to name but a few. This work could be a resource for the world Methodist movement and the United Methodist Church in the African continent as well.

This work centered on people who came to the United States from Sierra Leone in search of a better life. In this work, I therefore primarily sought to explore the spiritual journey of people whose families have immigrated to the United States from Sierra Leone. I used a small sample of persons who are members of the Campbell United Methodist Church. Though there is diversity of religious and spiritual beliefs among Sierra Leoneans, it is not my intention in this work to provide an engagement with all religious and spiritual practices, beliefs and traditions that influence the lives of Sierra Leoneans. This sample will provide insight in to some of the religious and spiritual practices that influence Sierra Leoneans. It is my hope that this work will also benefit other religious groups and Christian denominations that have opened their doors to immigrants around the USA and around the world.

### **Context of Ministry**

I came to the United States in the year 2000 as an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church, Sierra Leone Conference. I came as a delegate to the United Methodist General Conference that was held in Cleveland, Ohio from May 31 to June 15 2000. At the end of the conference, I decided to visit relatives in San Jose, California. I later decided to stay in San Jose, California to further my theological education. I became a citizen of the United States in 2007. In the first four years of my residency in San Jose, California, I served several churches in the areas of church evangelism and Christian discipleship. Some of these churches such as the Family Prayer House Church are typical indigenous churches that are predominantly West African in origin.

While attending the Pacific School of Religion from 2007-2010, I served as director of West African Ministry at Campbell United Methodist Church. In 2010, I was officially appointed by the Bishop Warner Brown of the California Nevada Conference as associate pastor of

Campbell United Methodist Church with the sole responsibility of the West African Ministry besides other duties as assigned by the pastor in charge and the Staff Parish Relation Committee (SPRC). My ministry has never been limited to Sierra Leoneans who attend Campbell United Methodist Church but has extended beyond the walls of Campbell UMC to include places like Stockton, San Francisco and Sacramento in Northern California. In 2015, I was accepted to the Doctor of Ministry degree program in “Spiritual Renewal, Contemplative Practices and Strategic Leadership” at the Claremont School of Theology (CST), Claremont, California. During my studies at CST this practical research project was conceived and conducted.

### **Campbell United Methodist Church**

Members of Campbell United Methodist Church have often heard the story told that their church started back in the 1880s when people came to California from all over the world seeking fortune during the gold rush. One of the first of these people to come to California was Benjamin Campbell who came with his family from Missouri. In 1851 Benjamin Campbell bought about 160 acres of land in the Santa Clara Valley and started growing fruits with his family for the growing Campbell and the wider Santa Clara population.

Having pursued the Archives, Historical Records and Bulletins of Campbell United Methodist Church the following historical narratives can be constructed.<sup>1</sup> Prior to 1888 the Methodist Episcopal community was established around the Santa Clara area and was overseen by William Taylor who later became a Bishop of Africa from 1884 to 1896. The first gathering of 12 people in Campbell Hall was held in 1888. By April 30, 1891 the first church building was erected and located at Campbell Avenue, between central, and First Street. As the town of Campbell prospered, the membership of the church increased as well. By 1903 the membership

---

<sup>1</sup>Campbell United Methodist Church, *Historical Records and Bulletins* (Campbell, CA: Archives and Bulletins, 1888-2018).

grew to 32 active members. The church built its first parsonage in 1905. Like the rest of the country the church suffered through years of depression. By the start of the Second World War people were drafted into the war and these tensions affected the church greatly. In 1953 the church bought a piece of land on Winchester Boulevard where it presently exists, and by 1963 it had built and consecrated the current sanctuary shown in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1. Internal View of Campbell United Methodist Church.

During the early 1960s the church had increased in membership and spiritual programs like youth council, spiritual retreats, and a number of community outreach programs. By 1968, the church joined the Santa Clara county authorities to secure low cost housing for the needy. With the unification of the church with the Evangelical United Brethren in 1968, the church was named The First United Methodist Church of Campbell and later Campbell United Methodist Church.

In 1986 Richard and Roberta Corson were appointed as pastors of the church. It was during the tenure of the Carson's in the mid-80s that West African immigrants started attending services at Campbell United Methodist Church. The first West African to gain membership in

the church was Mr. Joseph Kappia. In 1997 Campbell United Methodist Church became reconciling congregation. In the United Methodist church, this means a commitment to love all people without prejudice. It means to truly have an open heart, mind and doors to all and be inclusive in faith.

Campbell UMC is a faith home to many diverse people. It shares its space with New Creation, a second-generation Korean Methodist community that serves a growing Korean population in the Santa Clara Valley (see Figure 2). It is this welcoming community that has opened its doors, hearts, and minds to Sierra Leoneans as a home where they may express the spirituality and religious identity that enables them not only to bridge the divide between their native land and the United States, but also to survive and flourish.



Figure 2: Sign Post of Campbell United Methodist Church.

## **A Brief Introduction to the Republic of Sierra Leone**

Sierra Leone is a former British colony that gained its independence from Britain on April 27 1961.<sup>2</sup> As shown in Figure 3 below, the country is bordered on the West by the Atlantic Ocean, and lies between two other West African countries, Guinea in the North, and Liberia in the South. Sierra Leone is approximately 71,760 kilometers in area with a population of eight million people.

Sierra Leone is divided into four provinces: North, South, East and West with a total number of sixteen districts for administrative purposes. Elected government officials run each district though most of the powers are held by the central government in the administrative capital, Freetown, located in the West of the country. After gaining independence from British colonial rule, the political arena in the now Republic of Sierra Leone has been occupied by two major political parties; The All people's Congress (APC) and The Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP). However, the military has taken power several times and given it back, sometimes reluctantly. The latest military coup in 1997 ended with a military action taken under the auspices of the Economic Cooperation of West African States.

There are sixteen tribes in Sierra Leone with different ethnic tribal languages. English is the official language in Sierra Leone, and Krio, a mixture of English and local dialect is the lingua franca spoken by all. Some of the tribes that are represented at Campbell United Methodist Church include: *Konos, Mendes, Fullahs, Krios, Temnes and Kissi*.

---

<sup>2</sup>A. P. Kup, *Sierra Leone: A Concise History* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1975), 209-210.



Figure 3. Map of Sierra Leone.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Political Map of Sierra Leone, “Nations Online Project,” accessed March 20, 2018, [https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworldmap/sierra\\_leone\\_map2.htm](https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworldmap/sierra_leone_map2.htm).



There are three major religions in Sierra Leone: African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity. These religions are tolerant of each other. It is difficult to find a family in Sierra Leone that does not have practicing members representing one of these religions. Despite the natural wealth of the country, which is rich with rich deposit of gold, diamond, and bauxite, the majority of the people remain in abject poverty. This is one factor that has contributed to emigration in search of better living conditions. Another serious factor is the civil war that lasted for the decade from 1992 to 2002. As recently as 2016, the country also suffered from the Ebola epidemic that cost the lives of over 4,000 people in less than six months.

### **Immigrating to the United States of America**

Over the past decades, political instability, poor economic conditions, poverty, tribal wars, and ethnic divisions have contributed to the desire of Sierra Leoneans to seek refuge in the West and especially in the United States of America. Some Sierra Leoneans emigrated with the hope of securing a better life for themselves and their families. Others experienced religious persecution in their tribal and ethnic locations and to avoid further inhumane treatment and demoralization emigrated to the West or the United States, which accommodated them. Sierra Leoneans however, encountered a new social location, which they accepted and integrated with their indigenous Sierra Leonean life styles, religious and spiritual practices.

Throughout the past several years of my residency in California, I have met immigrants from all provinces of Sierra Leone. Through my encounter with a significant number of these immigrants, I observed that some were ardent, fervent and passionate Christians and others were not. Some of these immigrants wished to continue their religious practices in the United States but have found no space or platform to do so. Others, however, changed their religious or spiritual

practices for convenience. For example, some who previously followed African Traditional Religious practices changed to Christianity. Some Muslims changed from Islam to Christianity, and some Christians converted to Islam.

### **Sierra Leoneans at Campbell United Methodist Church**

The history of Sierra Leoneans at Campbell could be traced back to the mid-1980s when Mr. Joseph Kappia, an immigrant from West Africa (Sierra Leone) became a member. This is what Joseph Kappia said when I spoke with him:

I was received into membership at Campbell United Methodist Church in 1986. When I arrived in San Jose, I used to work in one of the convalescent homes down Winchester Boulevard. While working at the convalescent home I was looking for a Methodist church to attach myself and continue with my spiritual and religious practices. Fortunately, I met Bob Bennett, who worked as a Methodist missionary to Liberia. Mr. Bennett showed me Campbell United Methodist Church. In fact, he went to pick me up one Sunday for my first church service at Campbell UMC. From the day he brought me to Campbell United Methodist Church, I never stopped. This time coincided with the appointment of Richard and Roberta Corson as pastors of this church. I was received into membership about the same year I started attending the church. I attempted many times to bring West African and Sierra Leoneans to the church. However, by 2000 there were up to ten Sierra Leoneans in the church including my niece Mariama Samah.<sup>4</sup>

When I came to Campbell United Methodist Church in 2004, I met a handful of Sierra Leoneans including Joseph Kappia. By 2005 the membership of Sierra Leoneans or West Africans at Campbell UMC started increasing steadily and there were up to thirty by the end of 2005. What followed after I was introduced to the church and pastors in 2004 were a series of meetings between Sierra Leoneans and the church authorities on exploring intentional faith ministry. The meetings were centered on creating an outreach ministry to West Africans

---

<sup>4</sup>Joseph Kappia, conversation with researcher, Daniel Gbundema, author, on October 20, 2017. Joseph Kappia was among the first group of West Africans to be received into membership at Campbell United Methodist Church in the Mid-Eighties

including Sierra Leoneans in the Bay Area. By the end of the several meetings and discussion it was apparent that Campbell United Methodist Church would be the platform for this West African ministry in the Bay Area.

In 2006, Richard and Roberta Corson retired and Alan Jones and Linda Pickens-Jones were appointed as co-pastors of Campbell United Methodist Church. The Jones had worked as missionaries in Sierra Leone in the early 1980s. Because of their past missionary activities and experiences in Sierra Leone it was clear that they had great interest in developing Sierra Leonean spiritual and religious movement at Campbell United Methodist Church. It was also evident through their contacts and many sermon illustrations about Sierra Leone that they were willing to work and accommodate Sierra Leoneans for a more inclusive society at Campbell United Methodist Church.

By the end of 2006, the Administrative Council of the church approved the outreach ministry to West Africans. The ministry was named African Ministry, and Sierra Leoneans formed 98% of the population. After three years of studies at the Pacific School of Religion (2007-2010), I was officially appointed as associate pastor with the primary responsibility of taking care of the West African outreach ministry at Campbell. This ministry was first launched on the first Sunday of January 2007 as an integrated ministry of Campbell United Methodist Church. From this time on the membership of Sierra Leoneans in the church continue to increase unabated.

Within my ministry context, I was invited to preach on this first Sunday (Epiphany Sunday) in January. This first Sunday henceforth became a time Sierra Leoneans or Africans at Campbell celebrate what is now called African Epiphany. From that time onwards, I continue to help the senior pastors in the spiritual and other duties as assigned at Campbell United Methodist

Church. Additionally, I also conducted funerals, memorials, and baptisms, counseling and teaching at homes and in the church. I also continue to serve as a resource person to the wider West African community in the Bay Area and beyond to include places such as Stockton, Sacramento and San Francisco.

In summing up, Sierra Leoneans at Campbell United Methodist Church bring with them the religious beliefs and practices that shape their daily lives. These religious movements and spiritual phenomenon in the lives of Sierra Leonean immigrants at Campbell United Methodist Church were some of the motivating and significant factors for this work. I was motivated to ask why many Sierra Leoneans in the past and present undertook the project of immigration to the United States of America and how they continue to flourish or maintain their religious and spiritual practices in their adopted land and especially at Campbell United Methodist Church. In fact, in the light of personal uncertainties and existential nihilism that most of these Sierra Leoneans have experienced and witnessed during a harrowing history of national calamities and tragedies including wars, political upheaval, religious and persecutions and diseases, religion not only matters, it becomes and remains one of the most important aspects of their personal narratives and their daily lives. In this work, I explore how spirituality and religious practices help immigrants from Sierra Leone survive and flourish as they bridge the divide between their native country and the United States.

# CHAPTER ONE

## RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Religion and spirituality are two related terms and are intrinsically connected though they can be differentiated from each other. Larry Lapierre, a retired pastor of the United Methodist Church, in his unpublished dissertation states, “Spirituality is often used as if it is synonymous with religion. However, spirituality may encompass much that is not included by those who write about religion.”<sup>5</sup>

From my personal experience, religion has been the seat of spirituality. Practicing religion without spirituality can be seen as empty and essentially could be meaningless without any life sustaining energy. Many people say that they are spiritual and not religious. Religion describes the social, public and the organized means by which people relate to what we call the sacred or divine. Spirituality on the other hand describes things that are more personal in our relationship with the divine or sacred. With this definition, religions then could become one form in which human beings can express their spirituality.

David G. Benner states that religion “helps us hold together the tension of the disparate dimension of our beings, body, Spirit and soul: thoughts and emotions, being, doing and becoming. It provides us with the broad contours of a story that has the potential to be big enough to make life meaningful whatever comes our way. And it connects back to the roots of our existence and of our shared humanity.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>Larry LaPierre, “Development and Testing of a Spiritually Assessment Instrument” (D.Min. thesis, Boston University, 1994), 38.

<sup>6</sup>David G Benner, *Soulful Spirituality: Becoming Fully Alive and Deeply Human* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 68-69.

Benner's definition or image of a contour really draws attention to our human interaction with something called the divine, reshapes our humanity, and something that makes us whole.

Spirituality involves a transformative process that impacts all aspects of the human being. During the discussion phase of this project, one participant said that spirituality has invaluable helped, continues to help, and serves as a source of healing for his brokenness. He states, "Any time I get in my prayers, meditations in the morning and or in the evening, I feel transformed and healed inwardly. That is when I see and experience the Spirit of God."

For believers, the importance of religion is that:

- It helps us remain open to the transcendent and the mysterious.
- It teaches us to respond to things we cannot understand with our instincts.
- It keeps us in wonder and in awe.
- It grounds us in this life and helps us to live honestly
- It teaches us to live a meaningful human life filled with purpose
- It increases our depth and connects us with the divine.

Though one's spirituality cannot really be definite or defined in concrete terms with all beliefs systems, rituals and behaviors, it does seem that religion indeed could be identified with what humans do in response to their belief systems in which they adhere to specific rules, rituals and behaviors in life.

In his book *The World's Religion*, Huston Smith defines and describes religion and spirituality in a way that resonates with Benner's description and notion. Smith points out that "religion is a way of life woven around a people's ultimate concerns. It is a concern to align

humanity with the transcendent ground of its existence.”<sup>7</sup> This transcendental existence coupled with our human interaction with the divine bring to reality our religion and human spirituality.

In *The Religions of Man*, Huston Smith identified six dimensions of religion that religious and spiritual practitioners may use to recognize the differences between spirituality and religion. Smith named them as: Authority, Ritual, Tradition, Speculation, Sovereignty of God’s Grace, and Mystery.<sup>8</sup>

First, he points to authority as a dimension of religion and states that “there is the existence and application of divine authority and there is as always human governance in the affairs of any system of human belief.”<sup>9</sup>

He then notes that ritual in every sense is the most visible and recognizable element in religious affairs. He suggests that “religion originated in celebration and concern and they get together and act together.”<sup>10</sup> Larry LaPierre writes of rituals as “a means of celebrating and coming together to express faith in a communion.”<sup>11</sup>

In terms of tradition, Smith points to what is handed down from one set of people to another.<sup>12</sup> LaPierre indicates that tradition consists of “what one generation of humanity wishes to transmit to another generation.”<sup>13</sup>

Speculation, from Smith’s point of view, arises from the differences among the relevant data of scripture, tradition, reasoning and experience. Speculation arises because human beings

---

<sup>7</sup>Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 183.

<sup>8</sup>Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), 136-140.

<sup>9</sup>Smith, *The Religions of Man*, 36.

<sup>10</sup>Smith, *The Religions of Man*, 137.

<sup>11</sup>LaPierre, “Development and Testing,” 135.

<sup>12</sup>Smith, *The Religions of Man*, 38.

<sup>13</sup>LaPierre, “Development and Testing,” 136.

search for answers, or try to create order, or as they wonder about God or spiritual and religious phenomenon.<sup>14</sup>

Smith's final religious dimension is God's sovereignty that he translates as the grace of God in action. He writes, "God's free and unstinted gifts to humanity not only have made human life possible but have sustained it at every point along the way."<sup>15</sup>

The final dimension is mystery that is generally central to practices such as magic, miracle, occults, as they point to the esoteric and supernatural. Mystery is also a dimension of religious experience.

What is compelling in spirituality is the effort to have a relationship with a transcendent being. Ben Johnson describes this kind of spiritual relationship as something that "transcends phenomena: this relationship perceived by the subject as an expanded or heightened consciousness independent of the subject's effort, given substance in the historical setting and exhibited itself in creative actions in the world."<sup>16</sup>

In their day-to day activities either at home or at Church, Sierra Leoneans are prone to acknowledge God and ask for God's assistance in their lives. They are constantly seeking to relate to what is beyond their understanding. The sense of belonging to God is essential in spirituality as well as the capacity to love and belong to someone or something. Benner points to "the experience of belonging to those whose love is essential even to physical well-being. . . . Belonging to something other than self is foundational to any healthy spirituality."<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup>Smith, *The Religions of Man*, 139.

<sup>15</sup>Smith, *The Religions of Man*, 140.

<sup>16</sup>Ben C.Johnson, "Spirituality and the Later Years," *Journal of Religion and Ageing* 6 (1989): 125-139.

<sup>17</sup>Benner, *Soulful Spirituality*, 74.



Spirituality speaks not only to the efforts to have a relationship with the divine but also involves relationships and interactions between humans in an environment. This might be one of the basic factors for Sierra Leonean spirituality as they bridge the divide between their native country and the USA. Their ability to call on God in different cultural environments reinforced their belief and in God who leads them by day and by night, a God who stands by and with them throughout their journey into a foreign land.

Religion and spirituality in the light of the experience of Sierra Leoneans at Campbell UMC could further be considered as a search for meaning in their lives. Benner observes that our true spirituality is always the meaning we actually live, not the meaning to which we give cognition or verbal assent. It is always expressed, therefore in our behavior, not simply in our thoughts or inner commitments. What we say to others or to ourselves will tell part of our story. But deeper parts of it will be reflected in how we actually live our life. Personal meaning is a lived story, not simply a believed story or a told story.<sup>18</sup>

The lived story rather than a believed story is what makes these Sierra Leonean spiritual stories unique in this work. It is interesting to note that religious movements like Islam, Judaism and Christianity, to name but a few do enhance meaning in community settings and congregational worship. By sharing their stories in communities, they even search for a broader meaning to enhance their spiritual journeys. Sierra Leoneans at Campbell are no exception. They find meaning in gatherings, prayers, and worshipping, celebrating and naming ceremonies, such as birthday and or memorial services. Some of these activities help them to survive and flourish as they bridge the divide between their native land and the United States.

---

<sup>18</sup>Benner, *Soulful Spirituality*, 75.

Spirituality is indeed a lifelong experience of searching for a more meaningful life. This lifelong experience is incomplete until one arrives at a destination in relationship with God or the divine. Benner sums up this way: “Spirituality invites us to the development and deep meaning of life, not merely a meaning of long suffering. Any such meaning that has even a chance of being strong enough to help us face all that life brings is a meaning that will always have been fired in the heart of suffering.”<sup>19</sup>

## **Summary**

In summary, and from the previous discussion of religion and spirituality it is evident to say that religion and spirituality are interrelated though they can be distinctive in character. Religion provides us with a big enough story to make a life meaningful, it connects us to the roots of our being and transcendent source of being. It further provides us with basics for trusting an open relationship to the world and God. Spirituality on the other hand focuses on our souls, the indwelling soul that lives within us. It is something that focuses on the life within.

The presence of love is vital in human spirituality and religion. The standard that defines our relationship to others is exemplified in Jesus’ command to “love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>20</sup> Besides developing loving relationships, an abiding sense of belonging contributes greatly to a person’s wholeness and well-being. This sense of belonging is based on trust and safety.

---

<sup>19</sup>Benner, *Soulful Spirituality*, 76.

<sup>20</sup>Mathew 22:34-40 (NIV).

## CHAPTER TWO

### SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN SIERRA LEONE BEFORE CHRISTIANITY

In Sierra Leone and throughout the African continent, beliefs and spiritual practices governed individual and communal daily life, long before the advent of Christianity and Islam. These beliefs and practices continue today alongside Islam and Christianity and across the many tribes of Sierra Leone so that there is not a single indigenous tribal religion in the country.

European and Arab settlers in Sierra Leone and in Africa in general have erroneously believed that they brought religion to these areas. The colonial viewpoint was that the continent of Africa had savage inhabitants who had primitive religious practices. Primitive in this context meant backward. Terms such as rude or savage were used to suggest that people of Africa were uncivilized compared to their European counterparts. Anything outside the norms of European culture was considered savage and primitive.<sup>21</sup> A.P.Kup, in his book, *Sierra Leone: A Concise History*, states that Western missionaries described Sierra Leonean religion and spiritual practices as “earlier, ancient, old fashion, rude, original and primary.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, since the advent of Western missionary activities in Sierra Leone “Christian missionaries tended to see everything as uncivilized.”<sup>23</sup>

Missionaries tried to stop Sierra Leoneans from practicing their traditional worship. This approach caused societal upheaval, disturbance and occasional violence.<sup>24</sup> European explorers or

---

<sup>21</sup>Kup, *Sierra Leone*, 63-65.

<sup>22</sup>Kup, *Sierra Leone*, 63.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Kup, *Sierra Leone*, 87

missionaries in the past were guilty of making negative judgments about the ways Sierra Leoneans worshipped God. They looked at Sierra Leonean spirituality and religious beliefs about God and could only see Paganism or something barbaric. Idowu classified this negative label as a “mark of distinction between the enlightened, the civilized and the sophisticated on one hand and the rustic, the unpolished and unsophisticated on the other hand”<sup>25</sup>

In today’s society, Sierra Leoneans exhibit their spiritual and religious lives in many traditional ways. This can be seen in, but is not limited to, dress codes, spoken words, actions and food. Figures 4, 5 and 6 below indicate unique cultural elements such as dress.



Figure 4. A Cross section of Sierra Leonean ladies among other West Africans ladies posed in their colorful cultural dresses after church service.

---

<sup>25</sup>Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (New York: Orbis, 1973), 116.



Figure 5. Sierra Leoneans among other congregants feasting with native Sierra Leonean food.





Figure 6. Sierra Leoneans among other West Africans in their colorful dassiques in the fellowship hall at Campbell UMC

Though Christianity and Islam were introduced in Sierra Leone beginning in the 18th century, many Sierra Leoneans still practice traditional religious and spiritual rites. Some may describe these practices as syncretism or an expression of religious hybridism. Some Sierra Leoneans have incorporated beliefs or practices from these three religions of Islam, Christianity and African Traditional to express their religious hybridism.

Paul Knitter, a former professor of Theology in World Religions and Culture at Union Theological Seminary, New York City was no stranger to such religious and spiritual phenomena. In his book *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, he explains how in his exploration of Buddhism, he was able to overcome his crisis of faith. Across the various

theological questions that he raised, he was able to see how a Buddhist perspective could inspire him to become a more committed Christian.<sup>26</sup>

Paul Knitter States:

I have to be religious interreligiously. I have tried to practice and understand my Christian life through engagement with the way other people –Jews, Muslim, Hindus, Buddhist, and Native Americans - have lived and understand their religious lives. . . . My conversation with Buddhism has enabled me to do what every theologian must do professionally and what every Christian must do personally; that is to say, understand and live our Christian beliefs in a way that these beliefs are both consistent with and a challenge for the world in which we live. Buddhism has enabled me to make sense of my Christian faith so that I can maintain my intellectual integrity and affirm what I see as true and good in my culture; but at the same time, it has aided me to carry out my prophetic - religious responsibility and challenge what I see as false and harmful in my culture.<sup>27</sup>

Many Sierra Leoneans at Campbell United Methodist Church could see themselves in the light of Paul Knitter's experiences above. For many, their traditional beliefs helped them to understand and embrace Christianity. Some passed to and from Islam to Christianity and from Christianity to Islam and from African Traditional Religions to Christianity or Islam just to know who they were. All these religious and spiritual movements were and are done in an effort to understand each other and be able to live amicably with each other in their communities of faith.

At Campbell UMC, I have received many people from Islam and Traditional African Religion into membership of the church. Some were Muslims who got converted to Christianity and some Sierra Leonean Traditionalists who got converted to Christianity.

To understand Sierra Leonean spiritual and religious stories it is helpful to understand some of these religious and spiritual concepts that pre-date the advent of Christianity or Islam and continue to permeate the culture and informed the people of Sierra Leoneans to this day. Following are a few selected matters for consideration.

---

<sup>26</sup>Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be A Christian* (Croydon, UK: OneWorld, 2013).

<sup>27</sup>Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be A Christian* (Croydon, UK: OneWorld, 2013), xii.

## God

A form of a divinity is in the center of every religion and the ground of the spiritual lives of many if not all Sierra Leoneans. W.T. Harris and Harry Sawyer point to a monotheistic belief among Sierra Leoneans that God is the “Supreme and High God (Ngewo), whose aid or permission is always invoked in the phrase NgewoJahunn, meaning under the protection or by the permission of God.”<sup>28</sup> Every spiritual and religious expression or thinking of Sierra Leoneans is centered on God. Ngewo according to the Mende belief in Sierra Leone “is a shadowy figure living far away from people in spite of God’s ultimate control of their activities. Ngewois always invoked and prayed to.”<sup>29</sup>

Other names associated with God among Sierra Leoneans include:

*Yata*: in *Kono* means constant and always available. *Yata* signifies God who is always around and was there before the world was created. This resonates with the words in the gospel of John: “in the beginning was the word and the word was with God, and the word was God.”<sup>30</sup>

*Kruman Saba*: The *Temnes* interpret this as God of the world, the creator, and the one who lives before the world was created, the one who was and is and will ever be. This resonates with the creation story in Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”<sup>31</sup>

Among the tribes in Sierra Leone, God is mostly conceived of in masculine terms though there are feminine realities associated with certain names. Because each tribe in Sierra Leone has names for God, each name may reflect a different dimension of God. For example, names may indicate that God is real, and unique. God is the absolute controller of the universe.

---

<sup>28</sup>W.T. Harris and Harry Sawyer, *The Springs of Mende Belief and Conduct* (Freetown: University of Sierra Leone Press, 1968), 3.

<sup>29</sup>Harris and Sawyer, *The Springs of Mende Belief and Conduct*, 3.

<sup>30</sup>John 1:1 (NIV).

<sup>31</sup>Genesis 1:1 (NIV).



As Idowu states, God is understood as “a living one who is the ever present, ever active and ever acting reality in the world.”<sup>32</sup> These names as described in the paragraphs above are reflective of the fact that God is not abstract but real. The names convey the purest expression of their traditional religion and spiritual practices. This God is the same God Christians and Muslims introduced in Sierra Leone during their missionary expansion. Stanley Grenz points out that this “God is not merely your personal God . . . but rather the One that Christians have come to know in Christ, the God of the whole universe.”<sup>33</sup> This God can be reached at all times and anywhere.

### **Divinities & Ancestral Spirits**

Another spiritual and religious phenomenon among Sierra Leoneans is the belief in divinities and ancestral spirits. One can find among certain tribes such as, the *Konos*, *Temnes*, *Limbas*, and *Mendes* specific names that refer to lesser divinities or spirits. This is by no means a matter of polytheism. The belief in lesser divinities or spirits is a matter of consequence rather than ‘living being’. These divinities may be associated with hills, trees or rivers.

The idea of divinities may also be associated with ancestral spirits. For the most part these ancestors are venerated in memorial services or commemorated either where they died under trees, mountains or by the riverside. Memorial altars are made, and they become worship centers.

My maternal grandfather, a *Kono*, used to worship on top of a hill about four hundred yards away from his home. It was told that his own great grandfather, a warrior who drove away foreign powers from his territory, died in hiding on top of that hill. Thus, in remembrance of his

---

<sup>32</sup>Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 147.

<sup>33</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Created For Community: Connecting Christian Belief With Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 35.

great grandfather the whole village, even up to this day, goes twice a year on top of the hill to pour libation and worship.<sup>34</sup> The name of God is called, and the ancestors are venerated as saints. They believe the ancestors shaped their lives to know the Supreme God.

My paternal grandmother used to pick up little pebbles from a particular stream every year and pile them behind her doorsteps. She believed that her great grandmother disappeared in the area of that stream, but no one knew the cause of her demise. But by bringing these pebbles home every year, my grandmother was reminded of the goodness of her great grandmother who was highly respected in her community. As my grandmother piled pebbles or my grandfather worshiped on top of the hills libation is poured symbolically. Pouring libation with water, wine and rice cooked with palm oil over meat is very common among tribes in Sierra Leone and these rituals are still part of the Sierra Leone religious and spiritual life. These rituals do not happen without invoking the names of God and venerating the ancestors.

## **Spirit**

The belief in spirit is prevalent among the people Sierra Leonean. Idowu defines this as “the belief in recognition and acceptance of the fact of the existence of spirits that may use material objects as temporary residence and manifest their presence and action through the natural objects and phenomenon.”<sup>35</sup>

From my personal experience in dealing with Sierra Leoneans, many believe that such spirits exist either for good or bad in human environments. One of these spirits Sierra Leonean tribes reckon with, in some cases painfully and in others gracefully is the work of spirits in witchcraft through witches and wizards. There are always forms of religious and spiritual

---

<sup>34</sup> Libation in Sierra Leone context is the act of praying and pouring wine, water and food in remembrance of the saints who have gone to eternity. It reminds Sierra Leoneans about the deeds of their ancestors in the past. The act follows feasting and celebration for the most part.

<sup>35</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 173.

practices to maintain these spirits if they exist for the good of the community and extinguish them if they exist for the detriment of the community. However, there are no signs to prove whether someone is a witch or wizard. There are sometimes widespread speculations or assumptions and some people are suspected because of their unique distinctions. Idowu suggests that the belief is that a person's spirit can be sent on a mission to wreak havoc on another "person in body and estate" and that witches or wizards can operate alone or work together through guilds to send out, on their behalf, the spirit that can be visible or appear as lower creatures such as birds or other kinds of animals.<sup>36</sup>

### **Magic and Medicine**

Another spiritual and religious practice among tribes in Sierra Leone is in the form of magic and medicine. The ideas of magic and medicine are mostly attributed to traditional forms of healing. Traditional healers who provide medicine are generally assumed to have access to divine revelation and the ability to consult supernatural powers to explain certain phenomena. One may seek the aid of medicine or magic from those who have particular powers "either in the quest of healing together with the curative appropriate to a variety of cases of illness or the desire to discover a criminal offender in case of theft."<sup>37</sup>

Mentioned above are some of the religious beliefs and spiritual practices of the people of Sierra Leone and a significant number of those who find themselves in the United States and who are currently at Campbell United Methodist Church. They may continue to combine some of these traditional beliefs, which they love, with Christian prayers and rituals. They live with this religious hybridism. Through their stories that I will narrate later, one could find elements of

---

<sup>36</sup>Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 175-176.

<sup>37</sup>Harris and Sawyer, *The Springs of Mende Beliefs and Conducts*, 56.

some of these spiritual and religious phenomena. Some are attached and devoted to these belief systems and others are not.

With the advent of Christianity and Islam in Sierra Leone, a significant number of Sierra Leoneans became adherents. Even among practicing Muslims or Christians there were those who maintained some beliefs and worship practices associated with Traditional African Religions. They can rightly be described as having dual belonging or hybridism or more likely are syncretism in the practices. Some belong to a single religion but tolerate or play crucial roles in other religious traditions. It is the kind of inter-religious awareness and tolerance that contribute to their spiritual journey. It also develops the knowledge and respect of others that can bring about cohesion rather than division and warfare.

As Sierra Leonean immigrants gather for worship, prayer services, meetings and other spiritual exercises day in and day out at Campbell United Methodist Church, they do these with open minds, heart and soul. The uplifting, inspiring, and healing power of music is often expressed through singing and drumming. This spiritual practice brings people together from all religious backgrounds. Sierra Leonean members at Campbell are shown with drums or in singing in Figures, 7, 8 and 9, below.



Figure 7. Sierra Leoneans drumming at Campbell UMC during Sunday

Sierra Leoneans practice their spirituality openly with other people in the community and in the church. In recent years, Campbell UMC has experienced the active participation of Sierra Leoneans in church committees, hospitality and in their ministry of music. The African choir (as shown in Figure 8) contributes greatly to the richness of the music and worship at Campbell UMC.



Figure 8. Sierra Leoneans among other Africans singing an anthem on Epiphany Sunday, 2019.



Figure 9. Sierra Leoneans among other African choir members on Pentecost Sunday 2018 at Campbell UMC.



They are flourishing and surviving at Campbell as they bridge the divide between their native country and the United States. They continue to engage in remembering the goodness of their God, the God some called *Ngewoh* or *Yata*, for example in the process of migration.

They participate in the dedication of children, and celebrate Holy Communion and Baptism, the two sacraments of the United Methodist Church. These rituals bring joy, celebration and a sense of belonging. Figure 10 and 11 below depict the celebration of the sacraments.



Figure 10. Celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Communion at Campbell UMC.



Figure 11. Celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Baptism at Campbell UMC.



## CHAPTER THREE

### BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

#### **Stories of Immigration and Suffering**

Joan M. Maruskin is a retired United Methodist pastor who works with the women's division of the United Methodist Church globally. Many around the world have recognized her passion for work with refugees, asylum seekers, immigration and immigrants. In her book *Immigration and the Bible: A Guide for Radical Welcome*, she states, "The Bible is the ultimate immigration hand book. It was written by, for, and about emigrants and immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. It gives directions for responding to sisters and brothers from around the world who come to a land seeking safety, sanctuary and sustenance. It is also a book that many of our ancestors used to help survive the stress and strain of integration into a new country."<sup>38</sup> This statement resonates much with the experiences of Sierra Leoneans in Diaspora including those that find themselves at Campbell United Methodist Church. The Bible is used by Sierra Leoneans every day in their spiritual and religious journey, and they also see themselves in the stories of the Bible and find wisdom and direction for their own situations.

Furthermore, Sierra Leoneans' spiritual experiences at Campbell United Methodist Church can be best looked at as a journey towards God. Stories in the Hebrew Bible resonate with their stories as people who seek to live without violence and oppression. The stories of immigration, of Exodus, and other stories of hope and promises as found in the Old and New Testament books of the Bible offer assurance that suffering does not have the last and final say. These stories are foundational for understanding the experiences of immigrant members at Campbell United Methodist Church whose members and families came from Sierra Leone and

---

<sup>38</sup>Joan M. Maruskin, *Immigration and the Bible: A Guide for Radical Welcome* (New York: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 3.

who have embraced and affirmed the Christian faith and ethnic diversity of their adopted land, the United States.

Sierra Leoneans may be able to see parallels in their stories with those in the Bible. Experience of emigration can further be compared to that of the Jewish people who were forced out of Israel. In some historical context: “After Cyprus and Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BCE, the King issued a decree that commanded the Jews who had been exiled in 597 and 586, BCE to return home and rebuild the Temple.”<sup>39</sup> Many Sierra Leoneans return to build their homes and recover their native lands after several years of Diaspora living or after the civil wars that lasted for almost twenty years. Like many Sierra Leoneans in exile, Nehemiah, one of the most gracious prophets and leaders in exile, took the responsibility of rebuilding their land by energizing his people. In his effort to get his people to get to work, Nehemiah states:

I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on. . . . Then I said to them, “you see the trouble we are in: how Jerusalem lies in ruins; and its gates have been burnt with fire. Come, let us build the walls of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.”<sup>40</sup>

What comes to mind when one thinks about returning to your homeland to rebuild after years of Diaspora living or forced to live in a foreign land? Many Sierra Leoneans living in Diaspora like the Jews or Israelites go back and forth to rebuild their lands after devastating and turbulent times in their history. Many call the name of God, pray and fast to keep them focused. Like Israelites or the Jews, Sierra Leoneans have come a long way to experience God in their journey or migration experiences as they continue their spiritual and religious lives at Campbell United Methodist Church.

---

<sup>39</sup>Ralph W. Klein “The Book of Ezra & Nehemiah: Introduction, Commentary And Reflections,” In *TheInterpreter’s Bible: A Commentary In Twelve Volumes*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 666.

<sup>40</sup>Nehemiah 2:15-20 (NIV).

During the long years of civil war in Sierra Leone, I happened to spend a couple of years as a refugee in Guinea, a neighboring country of Sierra Leone. I used to spend time in prayers and meditation with Muslim brothers and sisters in a mosque or around their prayer grounds. There were no church buildings or Christian congregation for me to worship with. Later on, I created a Christian group of about ten refugees in the town where I resided. I was targeted later on because of this action. I started living in fear of my life. Every day was like living in a closet with no way to express my spirituality and religious life openly. I suffered like many Jews in Diaspora for my faith. I believe such living in a spiritual closet may have happened to many Sierra Leoneans including those at Campbell United Methodist Church who had lived somewhere in Diaspora.

The narratives of the disciples in the New Testament are a force to reckon with in the context of Sierra Leoneans in Diaspora. Paul, Steven, Peter and many other disciples in the New Testament went through religious and political persecutions because of their faith. The sufferings of Paul as he preached in various places as well as the persecution of other early Christians resonate with my suffering and the suffering of other Sierra Leoneans in Diaspora. These Sierra Leoneans, including myself, in Diaspora tend to use the Bible as a source of comfort for spiritual guidance as they bridge the divide between their native country and their adopted land.

In Exodus we read that:

When Pharaoh let the people go, God, did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines. . . . God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. . . The Lord went in front of them in pillars of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, that they might travel by day and night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup>Exodus 13:17-22 (NIV).

These Israelite stories of hope resonate with Sierra Leoneans. They take God as a liberator who saved them from their oppressors or from the menace of war and inhuman treatment in their very land. Some, including myself, see God as a God who led us through pillars of fire and pillars of cloud to find ourselves in the United States. Many like me believe that God emigrated with us. Some Sierra Leoneans, as you will see in the stories later believe that the God who emigrated with them is their liberator.

Some Sierra Leoneans, like Jesus and his family, were and are asylum seekers. In Matthew 2: 13-23 we are told that:

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said: “get up” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the child, to kill him.” So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night, and left for Egypt where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the lord has said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all boys in Bethlehem.<sup>42</sup>

Sierra Leoneans are no exceptions to such phenomenon. Many escaped from war-ravaged Sierra Leone to seek asylum in foreign lands including the USA. Many escaped with their families just to preserve their heritage. Like the Jesus stories, many families seek refuge in other lands just to save their lives and look for a better standard of living.

Like many other immigrants in the world, Jesus and his parents found themselves as asylum seekers. They crossed borders looking for sanctuary. The narrative in Matthew’s Gospel implies that Jesus and his parents were strangers and people welcomed and protected them from the powers that sought to destroy them.<sup>43</sup> Many Sierra Leoneans can identify with Jesus and his family because they too fled religious, political and ethnic persecution, which are all present-day grounds for immigrants and asylum seeking in the USA and around the world. Some Sierra

---

<sup>42</sup>Matthew 2:13-20 (NIV).

<sup>43</sup>Matthew: 2:13 (NIV).

Leoneans are in the United States and at Campbell because of Christian and other human hospitality. Jesus' family might have been helped and saved by people whom they never knew.

Some of the popular Psalms that Sierra Leoneans used in times of trouble or when seeking spiritual help and guidance are Psalm 91, 23, 137 to name but a few. One of these Psalms for example reads:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, and we wept when we remember Zion.  
On the poplars there we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our  
tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"  
How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?<sup>44</sup>

This Psalm was the first scripture I used at Campbell United Methodist Church when I was given the opportunity to preach sometime in January of 2007. This Psalm like many others reminds us of people who are uprooted from their original lands because of war, religious, political persecution, famine and other natural disasters and who find themselves seeking refuge or asylum or looking for a better standard of living in foreign places. This Psalm is a communal lament about people like Sierra Leoneans who find themselves in exile and want to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land. How can Sierra Leoneans sing the Lord's song in a foreign land especially where language plays a crucial role, and sometimes they are not welcome in some places?

This Psalm does not only apply to Sierra Leoneans in the United States, but also to other people from places like Honduras, Darfur, Cuba, China, Romania, and parts of Europe. It could also be applicable to people who find themselves in a position of homelessness, unemployment, hunger, thirst or near death. It could be applicable to people who are looking for a place to worship freely without fear.

---

<sup>44</sup>Psalm 137: 1-4 (NIV).

## Stories of Hope for the Future

Many Sierra Leoneans find hope in the Christian religion as an adaptive mechanism. The hope in Christ, the message of redemption in Christ, is one main source of hope for them as they bridge the divide between their native land and the USA. The prophecies of hope from readings like Psalms 146, which is centered on God and the plight of the widows and orphans, could be read in the light of Sierra Leoneans who are on the move, oppressed and desperate for survival.

The hope in Christ foretold by many prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel for the people of Israel could be seen in the light of Sierra Leoneans at Campbell as they bridge the divide between their native country and the United States. While in exile the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah prophesied the coming of the Messiah to save the Jews from the bondage of slavery and oppression. This time of exile for the Jews was a time of prophecies in preparing the way of Christ. The section of Isaiah 40 through 50 indicates the hope Israel sees and will get in the coming of a Messiah who later became the Christ. But again “a voice cries out, in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a high way for our Lord.”<sup>45</sup>

This wilderness cry resonates with Sierra Leoneans. For Sierra Leoneans at Campbell, all is not lost. They found a home like many other refugees and asylum seekers in the Bible or in Diaspora. God who took them out of Sierra Leone in turbulent times and who led them out of their poverty-stricken country to seek survival and to secure a good standard of living is the same God who saved their lives and the lives of their children. Because of this God, they are no longer strangers, exiles, or refugees but have found family and community because of the hospitable environment that has been created for them at Campbell United Methodist Church.

---

<sup>45</sup>Isaiah 40:3 (NIV).

Maruskin discusses Haitian refugees in her work. She describes refugees as people who “come to the United States seeking new life. They are often people of great faith and look to churches for radical, inclusive hospitality. One such church is the Christ United Methodist Church in San Diego.”<sup>46</sup> Her description also fits the work of Campbell United Methodist Church because they received Sierra Leoneans with opened doors, open hearts and open minds.

In response to some of the immigration issues around the world, the United Methodist Church put forward Social Principles that state:

We recognize, embrace, and affirm all persons, regardless of country of origin, as members of the family of God. We affirm the right of all persons to equal opportunities for employment, access to housing, health care, education and freedom from social discrimination. We urge the Church and society to recognize the gifts, contributions and struggles of those who are immigrants and to advocate for justice for all.<sup>47</sup>

Though not much has been done at Campbell United Methodist Church to settle Sierra Leonean refugees in homes or offered much in the way of programs for financial and other assistance, the spiritual integration and inclusiveness of Sierra Leoneans in the church community is beyond radical hospitality. The inclusive nature and spiritual platform offered to Sierra Leoneans at Campbell has expanded families and friends. Sierra Leoneans presently form the second largest ethnic group in the church community. They are growing, flourishing and surviving as they bridge the divide between their native country and the USA.

### **The Way of Compassion**

Through the lens of biblical and theological narratives, Joan Maruskin explains the need for radical hospitality. In her book, she offers great insight into not only the spiritual and

---

<sup>46</sup>Maruskin, *Immigration and the Bible*, 59.

<sup>47</sup>*Social Principles of The United Methodist Church: With Official Text and teaching exercises, plus Our Social Creed* (Washington DC: United Methodist Publishing House, 2009-2012), 32.

theological but also the socio-political and geographical narratives of migration, immigrants and refugee status in and around the world. Joan Maruskin invites compassion for those who are forced to leave their homes and their country in fear of persecution due to race, ethnicity, tribe, religious or political views and backgrounds, that forces them to emigrate.<sup>48</sup> Much of the biblical foundation in this book stimulated considerable theological insights into Sierra Leoneans experiences of emigration.

The Spiritual Renewal, Contemplative Practices and Strategic Leadership course at the Claremont school of Theology became one of the sources for this work. This course, which is taught by several professors, including Frank Rogers provides great insights into the practical as well as theoretical aspects of the God at work with us and in us, and the scholastic dynamic of my spiritual journey.

The biblical narratives about compassion, hospitality for strangers, refugees, asylum seekers and displaced people reflect what Frank Rogers calls radical compassion. A compassionate style that “Jesus likens to an extravagantly loving father who grieves a prodigal, plunges through the pigsties of obscenity, who suffers with the pain of separation, and who rushes down the road, eyes wet with compassion, to embrace his beloved’s return, soiled clothing and all.”<sup>49</sup> It is the heartbeat of humanity that makes one feel the pain of another person.

In his book *Practicing Compassion*, Dr. Rogers designed a system that could help spiritual practitioners with guided meditation in order to understand themselves, others and God’s divine compassionate actions for a transformative world. This design starts with a U-turn, a turn inside out to understand who we are in relationship to other people around us. Such guided

---

<sup>48</sup>Frank Rogers Jr., *Practicing Compassion: The Way of Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Fresh Air, 2012), 11.

<sup>49</sup>Rogers Jr., *Practicing Compassion: The Way of Jesus*, 14.



meditations are helpful to lead congregation in Spiritual Renewal, Contemplative Practices and in Leadership in the ministry of the Church. Throughout the course, I found out that as a leader in my context, I should be visionary.

Ben Campbell Johnson and Andrew Dreitcer's work *Beyond the Ordinary: Spirituality for Church Leaders* explains that a leader can only take his or her leadership forward with active and prolific vision for his or her group. Without a vision of the leader, the people lack a viable zeal or energy.<sup>50</sup> I noticed I was getting a little weak in my spiritual journey as I continue ministry in my middle age. This course renewed my spirit, mind, and soul for another vision.

---

<sup>50</sup>Ben Campbell Johnson, and Andrew Dreitcer, *Beyond the Ordinary: Spirituality for Church Leaders* (Cambridge, UK: William B. Erdmann, 2001), 65.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

I began this research with a library search to investigate how religion and spirituality helped Sierra Leonean immigrants survive and flourish as they bridge the divide between the United States and their country of origin.

This research project may be described as qualitative in nature. According to Van deCreek, Bender and Jordan such research includes “gathering materials, the expression of human experience and interpreting those materials, rediscovering the meaning of the human experiences that these materials express.”<sup>51</sup>

As I embarked on this work, I used materials from primary and secondary sources: published and unpublished, as related to the context. I also reviewed books and articles from anthropology, history, philosophy, sociology, and religion. These various fields are very important for this work because they deal with human beings, the environment and the political, social, religious and spiritual structures of a society and immigrant movement.

I sought out relevant sources in the church such as photos, diaries, journals and other articles. I also looked at church records, bulletins and mission statements to learn more about the history and developments in the life of the church. I searched other public documents such as newspapers articles and historical documents to find stories about the church and other related developments over the years.

The major source for this work came from conversations and discussions with participants. Participants shared their religious stories including their experiences of war, as

---

<sup>51</sup>Larry VandeCreek, Hilary Bender, and Merle Jordan, *Research in Pastoral Care and Counseling: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches* (Eugene, OR: WIPF & STOCK, 2008), 109.

refugees, in exile, and as immigrants. This was often painful because the stories were full of emotions and suffering.

### **Preparing for the Conversation**

I developed the discussion topics in consultation with some friends and mentors (See Appendix II for Discussion Questions). The questions centered on among other things: faith, religious convictions and experiences from native Sierra Leone and how these relate to experiences at Campbell United Methodist Church. I asked them to tell their stories about their faith journey, spiritual and religious experience from while they were still in Sierra Leonean up to their membership at Campbell UMC. Finally, I asked them about their relationship to Campbell UMC.

### **The Plan and Development**

I chose purposely to invite participants who could give or narrate their spiritual and religious experiences from the time they were in Sierra Leone up to the time they found themselves in the US or at Campbell UMC. I decided on engaging participants for the discussions on Sundays, as this was one of the best days for most of the participants. When I got the list of volunteers and participants who signed for each Sunday for discussion and conversation, I gathered them together. I informed participants of my doctoral studies and the project that I had undertaken. Having introduced my project, I invited their participation, and told them how I would use their discussion and conversation in this work.

I then arranged the times for conversations. The key area was to let the volunteers know the intention of the work and for them to tell their stories without fear or prejudice in terms of tribal and regional lines in Sierra Leone. I explained the Informed Consent Forms (See Appendix 1) to all volunteers so that they could understand how their stories and their identities would be treated confidentially and with respect.

Primary data for the project would be collected during discussion, interaction and conversation with participants. I organized five conversation and discussion groups of five or six participants in each group at a time. Participants shared their stories with me during the week and on Sundays we gathered as small groups in my office. Each conversation and discussion took approximately one and a half hours including prayer times. I made copies of the discussion questions, topic and consent forms and gave each participant a copy to read as we proceeded. The discussion questions consisted of two parts. The questions remained the same throughout the investigation (See discussion Questions in Appendix II).

As I continued to recruit volunteers, careful attention was given to choose people on tribal lines. Because Sierra Leoneans at Campbell come from different regions of the country and speak different tribal languages, careful attention was given to the number of participants from each tribe represented in the church. I decided to choose not more than eight participants from these different tribes (*Mende, Temne, Kono, Krio, Kissi and Fullah*) represented among Sierra Leoneans in the church. At the end of the conversation, I decided to narrate and analyze one story from each tribe represented in the church except for one participant who did not want her story to be shared.

As I planned, I paid some attention to the composition of each group in terms of tribe, age and gender. Some of the tribes included but not limited to *Temne, Kono, Mende, Fullah, Krio and Kissi* who migrated from Sierra Leone and worship at Campbell United Methodist Church. The discussion allowed participants to share their stories without hesitation or fear. I also encouraged participants to be fully involved and to voice their opinions and experiences. I was also engaged in active listening while recording the conversations with an audio recording device and taking brief notes.

Throughout the discussion, I utilized Eric H. F. Law's theory of mutual invitation. This process informs participants that:

In order to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak, we will proceed in the following way: the leader or designated person will share first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another person to share. Whom you invite does not need to be the person next to you. After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share. If you have something to say but are not ready yet, say 'pass for now' and then invite another to share. You will be invited to share again later. If you don't want to say anything, simply say, 'pass' and proceed to invite another person to share. We will do this until everyone has been invited. We will invite you to listen and not immediately respond to someone's sharing. There will be time to respond and to ask clarifying questions after everyone has had an opportunity to share.<sup>52</sup>

I explained this process to all participants and further asked and answered questions for clarity. The process of collecting data and storing them took six Sundays not consecutively. I gave two minutes maximum for the introduction and ten minutes maximum for the actual discussion and sharing of personal spiritual and religious experiences of participants.

### **Complications**

There were a few complications as the project moved forward. Sierra Leoneans are divided on tribal and regional lines. Bringing people together who are from the same country and yet speak different tribal dialects is challenging. Bringing the same tribes or people from the same region could breed suspicion of tribalism. Even though I was very careful in my selection, some participants questioned my selection. Sierra Leoneans are very conscious of tribal affiliation. For example, one of the participants remarked that if I intended to have my research largely represented by people from my tribe, *Kono*, he would not participate since he belongs to another tribe.

---

<sup>52</sup> Erick H. F. Law, *Holy Currencies: Six Blessings for Sustainable Missioner Ministries* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2013), 96.

Furthermore, the process of mutual invitation brought about a little complication. The process of mutual invitation could not be strictly observed because in Sierra Leonean culture respect for elders takes precedence. This means that when an older person wants to speak, younger persons are expected and should give permission, time and space. The younger persons are expected to be quiet and to listen. To speak when an older person wants to speak is considered disrespectful. I faced this dynamic many times during the planning and discussion process. However, I was successful in moderating using the process of mutual invitation for consistency. I was also cognizant of this cultural value and so I respected it and then returned to mutual invitation in an effort to not devalue the cultural norms or disrespect any of the participants.

Another complication was the choice of Sunday for discussion and conversation. Not everyone was available on Sundays to participate. Thus, after dealing with all those who wanted to participate on Sundays, I had to make alternate plans to meet one-on-one with some who could not be available on Sundays. The one-on-one was difficult to organize because of time and work schedule of volunteers. It was often difficult to get participants together for a prompt start of our meetings. For the most part it took me about fifteen to twenty minutes to get all participants to the designated space for each session.

One participant had to be excused from the discussion because she found it to be very emotionally overwhelming. She burst into tears as she started to share her story. I later learned that she had lost five of her family members in a house set on fire during the war in Sierra Leone. Working through grief and loss to this date is one of the effects of the war on Sierra Leoneans spirituality as they bridge the divide between their native country and the United States.

In spite of the challenges mentioned above, the project was executed successfully with over 50 participants willing to share their stories and to be available for conversation and discussion.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

#### **Part One: Selection of Participants**

The center of this investigation hinges on the stories of Sierra Leonean immigrants who find themselves at Campbell United Methodist Church and how religion and spirituality continue to help them survive and flourish as they bridge the divide between their native country Sierra Leone and the USA. The discussions had two parts. Part one centered on the introduction of participants: Their names, places of birth (Region in Sierra Leone), tribe, religion or Christian denominations before coming to the USA, membership at Campbell or not, years at Campbell UMC among others. This data was collected to ensure a fair representation of each tribe at Campbell United Methodist Church. There were five sessions and six people in each discussion group or session. Participants were given not more than two minutes to introduce themselves in part one.

Part two centered on the stories of participants. Each participant was given not more than ten minutes to say something in detail about their spiritual and religious experiences by concentrating on the following areas:

- Spiritual and religious experiences while in Sierra Leone?
- If you were in Sierra Leone during the civil war, how has the war affected your religious and spiritual life?
- Spiritual and religious life at Campbell compared to when in Sierra Leone?
- In other words, or in summary, how has Campbell UMC changed your life? What are the programs that affect you the most at Campbell UMC? (See Appendix of questions).



Although some did not answer in detail, others really told compelling stories. In collecting the data, I looked for more information from individuals who had lived in Sierra Leone before and during the civil war and who found themselves in the USA and at Campbell UMC. I also paid attention to participants who are able to articulate their experiences in matured and reflective ways.

Among the many shared stories, I concentrated on five compelling adults' stories, which are representative of the six tribes in the church. To get all the stories shared in this paper will be more of a repetition of stories. The stories I concentrated on for this research work are more reflective of spiritual and religious experiences and how these experiences help Sierra Leoneans survive and flourish as they bridge the divide between their native land and the United States. Some of the areas discovered were but not limited to prayers, meditation, singing and drumming, worship, libation, naming ceremonies, birth and death, community gathering and support and other rituals. As many Sierra Leoneans migrate and integrate, they continue to experience some of these spiritual and religious elements in whatever they do and wherever they find themselves

## **Analysis of Selection Process**

Sierra Leone is divided into four main regions: North, South, East and West. These regions for the most part are represented by different ethnic and tribal affiliations. The West is more a cosmopolitan region representing all ethnic and tribal groups. The regions and tribal affiliations are displayed on Table 1 below.

Table 1. Ethnic and Tribal Affiliation in the Four Regions of Sierra Leone

REGION	North	South	East	West
TRIBES	Limbo  Temne  Bronco	Mende	Kono, Mende  Kissi	Temne, Limba,  Mende, Kono,  Kissi, Krio  (and others)

For this project, the participants were drawn from several different tribes. Table 2 below shows the tribes that participated in this project. All the Sierra Leoneans tribes are not reflected in this study; only those tribes that are represented in the current attendance and membership of Campbell UMC. The Fullah tribe is not easily identifiable with any particular region of Sierra Leone. They are predominantly Muslims although some have until recently converted to Christianity because of factors such as Western Education, inter-marriage and interfaith dynamics.

Table 2. The Tribes, Regions, and Representations of Participants in this Project

TRIBE	Limba	Temne	Mende	Kissi	Kono	Krio	Fullah
Region (mainly)	North	North  West	South  East	East	East	West	---
Number of Participants	3	0	17	3	16	9	4

Participants in this project had diverse backgrounds as shown in Table 3 below. Some had belonged to the United Methodist Church or other Methodist denominations before migrating to the United States and before their participation in the ministry of Campbell UMC. Others were formerly Roman Catholic, Baptists, Muslims, and African Traditionalists. The African Traditionalists had also previously participated in both Christian and Muslim rituals. Two participants had grown up with no religious affiliation in Sierra Leone. However, they said that when they arrived in the USA, they thought it wise to belong to a church or spiritual organization, and Campbell United Methodist became a platform to do just that.

Participants were also asked if they could identify as Spiritual or Religious. Not all participants had reflected on this distinction before. A 20-year-old male who was a recent arrival to the United States indicated that he was a Muslim by birth but had never gone to a mosque. He had attended church services numerous times in Sierra Leone. He had attended and participated in many Christian gatherings and ceremonies in Sierra Leone before immigrating to the USA. He however indicated that he did not know the difference between what is religious and what is spiritual. In going to church, he was expressing his spiritual and religious beliefs.

Table 3. Participants Religious Self-Identification

Active members of Campbell United Methodist Church	45
Regular visitors to Campbell UMC	10
Members of Methodist Churches before migrating to USA	25
Roman Catholic before migrating to USA	10
Baptists before migrating to USA	5
Muslims before migrating to USA	10

African Traditional Religion before migrating to USA	3
No Religious Affiliation before migrating to USA	2
Both religious and spiritual	15
Spiritual	15
Religious	10
Both spiritual and religious	10
No opinion on whether spiritual or religious	5

Table 3 above shows how participants self-identified.

## **Part Two: Stories of Participants**

As we got into this section, I reminded participants about the goals and objectives of our discussion. I will use initials (not their real initials for confidentiality) for the participants who shared their stories. The first story is from TK who came from the East of Sierra Leone and who had experienced much during the civil war.

### **Story 1**

“I was once a victim of the rebel war in Sierra Leone. I attended the Methodist primary and secondary schools in the East of Sierra Leone and was very religious and spiritual, if you will. I attended church on Sundays, and we prayed as a family every morning before leaving home for school or elsewhere. My parents (father and mother) were strong members of the Methodist foundation in our town. Not attending Church on Sundays was not optional. I grew up in a strong Christian family, although my grandparents and some of my other relatives used to practice Traditional Sierra Leonean religious rites and functions. As a Kissi, I was required by tradition to

visit my grandparents every year in their village and that was how I learned about some Sierra Leonean traditional and spiritual rites.

“During the war, I left Sierra Leone for Ghana because of the killings and destruction experienced in the country. In Ghana I experienced what ‘Radical Hospitality’ meant. Campbell UMC reminds me often about it. The war separated me from my parents (deceased during the war), and devastated my town. I spent years behind rebel war lines and was abducted several times and suffered. I took consolation in a church that hosted me and took care of me in Ghana. I was about twenty-three years old when I migrated to Ghana. When I arrived in Ghana, a Wesleyan church received and adopted me. I received hospitable treatment from the church. The women’s chair that handled my case asked me several questions about my parents, my faith and myself. It was not too long for her to know that I am a fervent Christian and a Methodist. The church took care of me for two years while preparing my documents through the family resettlement program to join my sister here in San Jose. I never spent a dime while staying with the church.

“To conclude and give other people time to speak, I arrived in San Jose on December 23 1998. I found this church in 2006 probably because of the establishment of an African ministry that reaches out to Sierra Leoneans or Africans. Though Campbell United Methodist Church has not taken care of my immediate financial needs and refugee status, it has, however, shown radical hospitality comparable to that of the Wesleyan church in Ghana. Being part of a predominantly white church in this country and accepted as you are is radical. The integration itself we experience is really good. What I further like about CUMC is the idea of a reconciling church. I do not know much about the details of the reconciling structure here at the church, but I do know that we have people who identify as LGBTQ who are welcomed like immigrants like

us. This is very good. And I think we the Africans or Sierra Leoneans need to be mindful of other cultures in our midst. We are doing great in the church, pastor, and this could be attributed to your leadership and vision.”

### **Analysis**

Miss TK pointed out clearly that she was spiritual and religious. She attended a Methodist school and used to pray with her family spiritually.

She had a western education that enabled her to move to the United States through the help of a church. Her grandparents were traditionalists and she used to visit them. Through the visits with them she learned some Sierra Leoneans traditional spiritual and religious rites. Her parents died during the war, an effect that she cannot forget. She is still grieving. She learned much about hospitality both at the Wesleyan Church in Ghana and at Campbell United Methodist church.

One important Christian spiritual practice for TK is Christian prayer. She learned something about her Sierra Leonean traditions and rites through her grandparents. It is not uncommon to find such trend among present Christians in Sierra Leone. In fact, Western Education through Christian mission had and continues to have greater impact on Sierra Leoneans. Prayers are offered in many Christian or mission schools either in the morning, afternoon or in the evening as part of spiritual and religious development. Sunday school curriculums in many Christian schools were and are part of promoting Christian education and Christian discipleship. Such education Thomas Groom states “is to lead people out towards a lived response to God’s Kingdom in Jesus Christ. That response which is possible only by the

grace of God is a life of Christian faith.”<sup>53</sup> TK and her family who were members of the Methodist foundation grew through such religious, spiritual and educational frameworks. TK is still benefiting spiritually and religiously from Campbell United Methodist as she did in Sierra Leone and Ghana through church worship and prayers. She is worshipping the same God. She is still Christ-centered as she worshiped at Campbell with other races and with her Sierra Leonean brothers and sisters

Two other issues she mentioned in her story include (i) the hospitality she encountered in Ghana, which is similar to that at Campbell, and (ii) the meaning of being a part of an inclusive church that has become a reconciling congregation. In the United Methodist Church, reconciling churches welcome all people of all sexual orientation to be members and leaders of the congregation. Campbell United Methodist Church is a reconciling congregation that “seeks to welcome all irrespective of race, color, sexual orientation.”<sup>54</sup>

Campbell UMC has tried to be what Maruskin describes as an “inclusive community, mirroring Christ’s openness.”<sup>55</sup> One of the greatest factors for the growth of Sierra Leoneans religious and spiritual survival at Campbell is the hospitality accorded them since the institution of the African Ministry. At Campbell, Sierra Leoneans are welcomed in the church’s ministries. In fact, some Sierra Leoneans who need help with their immigration documents, childcare, school and academic issues are helped and cared for. It sounds like a promise ground for some who really need help to survive and flourish.

---

<sup>53</sup>Thomas H Groom, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story And Vision* (San Francisco: Jossey- Bass, 1980), 140.

<sup>54</sup>“Campbell United Methodist Mission Statement,” *Historical Records and Bulletins* (Campbell United Methodist Archives, 1888-2018).

<sup>55</sup>Maruskin, *Immigration and the Bible: A Guide For Radical Welcome*, 11.

Maruskin notes that in such a hospitable community people focus on “Christ and Christ’s creative life of hospitality and inclusiveness. It asks all persons to lead lives of love, truth and goodness by purposefully expanding the borders of their hearts, minds, home and churches by opening their hearts, minds and doors.”<sup>56</sup> TK has come to understand hospitality from churches in Ghana and in the United States. Campbell United Methodist Church opened its doors to Sierra Leoneans to enable them to practice their religion and spirituality with other cultures like the people who identify as LGBTQ. Sierra Leoneans through their spiritual and religious participation have integrated well in to the life and ministries of Campbell United Methodist Church.

## **Story Two**

The second story is from DK who was born in the Western region of Sierra Leone and who had never experienced the rebel war although he had relatives who suffered and went through the ordeals of the civil war in Waterloo, which is West of Sierra Leone.

“I grew up as a Christian. I was a member of the marching band in the secondary school I attended and which the Royal Family from the United Kingdom built. It is a Christian institution. Christian prayers and devotions were not optional. I play the flute and can play Christian songs and hymns and can sing and play with a band. I am familiar with up to one third of the hymns in our hymnbook here at the church. I led the school band for four years before migrating to the United States in 2006. I came to this church in May of 2007. It was during a memorial service officiated by Pastor Gbundema and Alan Jones.<sup>57</sup> I got my first impression of this church during that service.

---

<sup>56</sup>Maruskin, *Immigration and the Bible: A Guide for Radical Welcome*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> Alan Jones served as pastor of Campbell United Methodist Church from 2006-2010 while pastor Gbundema was serving as coordinator African Ministry and completing his M.Div. at the Pacific School of Religion.



“Campbell UMC meant a lot to me. I see slight differences and similarities in the worship service compared to that I was used to in Sierra Leone. I am used to organ, piano, trumpet, choral and chancel singing, drumming, and many more. There was culture shock at the initial stages, but now I am very much comfortable here. Sometimes we are given the chance, like the Epiphany service to exhibit our Sierra Leonean ways; our spirituality and religious significance. We clap, dance, and shout loud with drums and with other African musical instruments. We should be grateful that we have a platform to exhibit our spiritual and religious lives with other people without fear. We are an example of interracial community.

“I serve in the main chancel choir but other areas that inspire me in this church including the African styles of worship are the African Epiphany service, African choir, and the children’s pageant. I guess we have a platform to share our spiritual and religious ways of life. My main concern will be how to increase our share of resources and time for the work of the church.”

### **Analysis**

DK is no different from TK in his initial spiritual and religious education. He went to a mission school, learned much about the church through Western religious education and has a clear knowledge about prayers in church. He comments on the interracial and integrated community he finds himself in at Campbell United Methodist church. He also notes that Campbell United Methodist Church is a reconciling congregation that welcomes all people without regards to race, color, and sexual orientation. This is one of the biggest strengths of Campbell United Methodist Church. Its ministries are geared towards inclusiveness and integration. No one is left out.

Sierra Leoneans at Campbell are encouraged to participate and contribute greatly to the richness and growth of the church through special services like the African Epiphany service DK mentioned in his story.

The African Epiphany as it is called is a service conducted by Africans or Sierra Leoneans on the first Sunday of every year. The institution of the African ministry in the church coincided with the Epiphany season of the church. This service of festivities commemorates the beginning of the African Ministry at Campbell United Methodist Church. This service is conducted in typical African modes of celebration including clapping, singing with joy, and dancing. It is always a service filled with vigor, and movement. One of the major instruments used in this service is the drum (See figures 7&9). No one leaves until the service is ended. During this service, Sierra Leoneans and other Africans exhibit in many ways their Christian religion and African spirituality.

These African practices are reflective in worship styles of biblical communities. The Psalmist calls forth worship with the words: “Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; Make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of the singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn- shout for joy before the Lord.”<sup>58</sup> Making a joyful noise by Sierra Leoneans at Campbell UMC is a bold declaration of God’s glorious name and nature, with shouts, clapping, expressing praises and playing instruments like cymbals and drums. Through the creative use of African or Sierra Leonean music, dance, cultural values and shout of joy, through the education of Sierra Leoneans’ spiritual and religious practices and through fellowship and other uplifting events and worship services, Sierra Leoneans and other congregants at Campbell United Methodist Church are

---

<sup>58</sup>Psalm 98:4-6 (NIV).

brought together around common interest and concerns. These religious and spiritual activities among many others are helping Sierra Leoneans survive and flourish as they bridge the divide between their native land and the USA.

The Children's Pageant is one of the times that parents and children fill the pews of Campbell UMC. Any time these children sing or perform, Campbell UMC bursts into spiritual exuberance.

### **Story Three**

The third story is from RD from the East in the *Kono* district of Sierra Leone. "I came from the East and I grew up in an atheist environment in the *Kono* district. I grew up with one of my uncles who never went to church, or mosque. He never attended Traditional African or Sierra Leonean religious and spiritual rites. In fact, he used to call some of these Traditional African rites archaic and outmoded. He viewed Muslim and Christian ceremonies as means of exploitation and religious or spiritual indoctrination.

"I experienced a little bit of the civil war in 1992 in Sierra Leone. After that, I traveled to the Netherlands in 1993, a year after the civil war started in Sierra Leone. My two years in the Dutch land as a refugee was a struggle, a great struggle. However, staying in a refugee camp in the Netherlands brought me closer to the church and through the church I was able to make my way to the United States. I migrated to the USA in 1995 at an early age from the Netherlands. The church as I experienced it today is very powerful in the West. I mean in Europe and the USA. The church brings one closer to God. I believe in God though I grew up with an uncle who did not.

"Before I left the shores of Sierra Leone, I used to see displaced people coming with virtually nothing except with bundles of clothing and some with their children on their back. I

once lost my room for over three months to one of the dignitaries from *Kailahun*<sup>59</sup> who was displaced and had to come to *Kono* district to take refuge.

“Though I never went to church while in Sierra Leone, I nevertheless had some Christian experiences in one of the Christian schools I attended before leaving for the Netherlands. I used to attend Muslim schools because of the scholarships offered to me. However, in 1991, when one of my sisters started teaching at the Koidu Secondary school, which is a United Methodist mission school, she transferred me to the school. During my short time at Koidu Secondary school, we used to have Christian devotions: singing Christian songs and hymns and praying Christian prayers before going to classes. I started to love these exercises because my peers with whom I sat in class did them. I did admire the leadership of my classmates in leading devotional prayers in school.

“At Campbell United Methodist, I have experienced some spiritual inspiration like, the hymns, songs and prayers similar to the ones sung at Koidu Secondary School when I attended. I think the leadership in the church is good. I can read and speak in church without anxiety. One of the things I further like in this church is the children and Sunday school curriculum. I think it is very educative and inspiring for the kids and it helps parents to appreciate what the church meant to them. When I sit in the pews and hear speakers, especially good speakers, speak to the kids, it inspires and energizes me spiritually.”

## **Analysis**

RD had very little in the way of spiritual or religious experiences while in Sierra Leone. He saw friends lead spiritual and religious devotions. He attended a religious school. He was not affected much by the civil war although he experienced some form of discomfort before moving

---

<sup>59</sup>Kailahun is one of the Districts in Sierra Leone and it is predominantly Kissi in tribal origin.

to the Netherlands. RD knew about Church hymns and songs through attending Christian school. Though he had very scanty views about the Christian ways of life, he nevertheless acknowledged the fact that while in Netherlands, the Church helped him immigrate to the United States. The leadership development at Campbell brings him more insight to his spiritual and religious growth. The roll of the church in the life of RD seems very paramount in his story. From this story, it appeared that the church played a very significant role in his life.

The mention of the Netherlands reminds me of my two siblings in Amsterdam. During the civil war in Sierra Leone, the Netherlands opened its door to refugees from Sierra Leone. My two younger siblings migrated to the Netherlands through the resettlement program that was opened to refugees from Sierra Leone. Refugees from Sierra Leone stayed in camps for several months until they could establish a permanent residence. Some refugees, like my brothers, were supported by the church to establish permanent structures for themselves. This is probably what RD meant when he said, “the church is powerful.” The *Kono* district, which is his place of birth, is the seat of diamonds in Sierra Leone. Many political analysts attributed the war to the fight for diamonds in Sierra Leone.<sup>60</sup>

The British colonized Sierra Leone during the scramble for and partition of Africa in the early 19th century.<sup>61</sup> Western Education sometimes through the church is one of the legacies of British colonial rule. Through western education, Sierra Leoneans now find themselves relating to the rest of the world including the United States. Some find themselves at Campbell where they now express their religion and spirituality. That is what the mission schools have done, not only for RD but also for many Sierra Leoneans coming to the USA.

---

<sup>60</sup>The movie *Blood Diamonds*, a German –American Political war thriller supported this notion. It is estimated that over three hundred thousand people lost their lives and millions were displaced and turned into refugees around the world.

<sup>61</sup>Kup, *Sierra Leone*, 165.

RD noted that his uncle did not practice African Traditional Religion, and he was not interested in any form of the major religions, such as, Christianity or Islam. There are very few Sierra Leoneans even in modern days who do not relate to African Traditional Religions in some way. These practices may be as simple as paying homage to ancestral spirits by pouring libation to more involved rites of worship of a divine and transcendental being.

RD's memory is of childhood religious practices. In the same way, in the worship hour at Campbell UMC, the children participate in an uplifting event for about five minutes. They are called to the front of the sanctuary and hear a message that is inspiring and educational not only for the children but for the entire congregation.

#### **Story Four**

TN, one of the participants who is not a regular member of the church but a repeated visitor for some years shared his thoughts.

"I do not belong to any religious or spiritual organization, but I come here because of my mother who is a member of the church. I grew up with my grandfather for the most part. Though my grandfather was a teacher in an Islamic school, he practiced more of African Traditional Religion in Sierra Leonean context. He would go to church and mosque ceremoniously when we were in the city of Bo.<sup>62</sup>

"I followed his footsteps pretty much, and I love my African Traditional Religion and religious rites and rituals. One of the most important aspects of my Traditional rites and rituals is pouring libation in remembrance of my ancestors who have gone ahead of us to eternity. I read the Bible sometimes like I read other literature. I see some similarities with our ancestral stories. Stories of the flood, Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve, the Isaac and Jacob stories, story of Babel

---

<sup>62</sup>Bo is one of the towns in Southern District in Sierra Leone and it is predominantly Mende.

and even the virgin conception resonate with some of our African stories. They are very inspiring, spiritual and religious.

“One thing that inspires me since coming to Campbell United Methodist Church is the gathering time after church: I believe it is what you call the coffee hour time in the fellowship hall or under the tree for chatting or greeting one another. I have had couple of opportunities to speak with many people I do not know. Their perspectives on spirituality and religious issues continue to fascinate and inspire me greatly. I think this is one of the things we need in our communities. Get together and share our experiences and stories without fear of intimidation. Sierra Leone is well known for sharing religious and spiritual experiences without fear or intimidation. I am very excited in worshipping with you though not yet a member of the church. I was not in Sierra Leone during the war, but I lost several relatives during that time and I contributed several times to help some of my struggling relatives during the war.”

### **Analysis**

The city of Bo that TN mentioned in his story is now, as I write, the second largest city in Sierra Leone. It was not affected by the civil war like many other cities and districts. Unlike Kono district, Bo has very little deposit of diamonds and diamond mining is not conducted there on a large scale like in Kono. However, Bo has many Christian mission schools. Much of the Traditional and religious rites TN learned might have come from his grandfather. That coupled with what he learned from Christian mission schools in Sierra Leone and at Campbell could be responsible for some rich religious and spiritual formation. He can now share spiritual and religious stories with other worshippers at Campbell United Methodist Church.

The gathering after church which is called the “coffee hour” at Campbell is a time of sharing and getting to know other people who are not well known to us. TN is conscious of the

importance of this time at Campbell. This time is also a time of great opportunity for radical hospitality at Campbell. Members and visitors TN said share their stories at this time. People get to know each other.

TN was not affected by the war personally because he was not in Sierra Leone during the war. However, he mentioned that he helped the majority of his grieving relatives and friends and community affected by the war.

Traditionally, Sierra Leoneans exhibit community cohesiveness and help one another in times of trouble and calamity. When one family or friend is affected by any disaster or natural phenomenon, the community, tribes or ethnic group is affected. One area of support is during death or bereavement. During such periods of grief or loss, Sierra Leoneans can be seen visiting the homes of the deceased in an effort to support the family financially and morally.

### **Story Five**

This story is from ZIM who was born Muslim and grew up between the two religions of Islam and Christianity.

“I was born in Guinea and a Muslim by birth. My parents told me that we came to Sierra Leone when I was eight months old and settled in *Kambia*.<sup>63</sup> At age four, I was sent to the Koranic school to study. I used to cry a lot because of the discipline and corporal punishment given by the teachers. Because of the excessive corporal punishment, my parents withdrew me from that local Koranic school.<sup>64</sup> By age six, my parents and I moved to *Makeni*,<sup>65</sup> and I started attending a Catholic primary school. I learned the Catechism and the Catholic Rosary in the

---

<sup>63</sup>Kambia is one of the Northern District Regions in Sierra Leone. It is predominantly Temne though other tribes like the Fullah who could trace their route from Guinea could be found.

<sup>64</sup>A Koranic school in Sierra Leone in the late 60s was a local school created at home or behind closed doors. Memorizing parts of the Koranic Surahs and scripts did teaching. Written work was done using liquid ink and tablet crafted from wood.

<sup>65</sup>Makeni is one of the Northern District Headquarters of Sierra Leone. It is predominantly Temne and Limba.



Catholic school. I grew up as a Catholic and a Muslim. I used to go to church on Sundays and to Mosque with my parents on Fridays. The Catholic services were very meaningful to me because I was always leading my class in many Sunday school activities. I experienced a ‘dual belonging’ if you will, and my parents never stopped me from the Catholic services. In fact, they used to drop me off to church and go back home. I would return home under the care of priests or other family members. During high school in the Catholic mission I was offered a scholarship to study in a Catholic seminary to train as a nun. My parents refused the offer. They told the Catholic authorities bluntly that they did not want that direction for me. For this reason, my parents withdrew me from the Catholic High School. My family later moved to Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone.

“In Freetown, I attended the Methodist Girls High School. I started singing in the school choir at the Methodist Girls High school. For the most part, when I come home, my parents used to call me pastor at home because they could hear my voice singing or rehearsing the school hymns and songs. I love the Methodist hymns and songs especially those by Charles Wesley. My father died before I migrated to the United States in 1991. My mother died during the civil war in 1998. A fragment struck her during a cross fire between two warring groups.

“The civil war really devastated my family and several of my relatives died as a result of the war. Our family home was burned down during the war. I had planned to bring my mother to the USA the same year she died. Her immigration documents were already in process. I lost faith in God during those times. I questioned and called on God saying: ‘WhymeO God?’ It took me some years to get over this. I was not able to travel to Sierra Leone to bury my mother because of the risk involved.

“I started attending church services at Campbell UMC in 2004, and I became a member the following year. I am one of the foundation members of the ministry and I am glad we have a platform to share some of our spiritual and religious experiences especially with people of different races. I am presently not in any leadership position or actively participating in any special ministries because of my work schedule and distance to San Jose. However, I want to say that because of our presence at Campbell, things are not the same as Campbell used to be. We count as the second largest racial group in the church. I just hope that we will make increased input into the ministries and resources of the church for a better and sustainable growth. I hope to join the choir (Chancel and African choir<sup>66</sup>) soon when I move closer to San Jose.”

## **Analysis**

ZIM may appear unique because she was from a Muslim family and then became a Christian. This trend is very common among Sierra Leoneans either in Sierra Leone or within some in Diaspora, especially the United States. Because of this double belonging, Sierra Leoneans are engaging Christianity and Islam in natural ways. Many Sierra Leoneans like ZIM today cannot keep Islam and Christianity apart. Instead, they practice both religions at the same time without condemning one or the other.

ZIM's parents came from Guinea, a predominantly Muslim state and a former French imperialist colony. Kambia, ZIM's first settlement, is one of the Northern Districts that is predominantly *Temne* in ethnicity. She attended a Koranic school, as well as Catholic and Methodist Institutions, all of which helped to shape her dual religious identity.

---

<sup>66</sup>Chancel and African choir are all part of the ministries of the church. None is separate. There are many choir groups in the church but are all part of the same Campbell United Methodist Church.

The war affected ZIM. Her mother died as a result of the war. She had planned to bring her mother to the United States. ZIM like many other Sierra Leoneans suffered because of the war.

ZIM appreciated the effort of Campbell UMC in integrating Sierra Leoneans and other African immigrants into membership at Campbell UMC. Though ZIM is not in any leadership position in the church, she appeals to Sierra Leoneans to increase their resources to build the church or African Ministry. ZIM's stories among many others appeared to be very much a struggle between religions, cultures and geographical regions. She has spent her lifetime being shaped by migration from childhood to adulthood. She represents those Sierra Leoneans who are comfortable in their dual religious identity or belonging

Knitter best explains the concept of dual belonging in his book: *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*. Knitter explained and narrated how becoming a Buddhist made him better understand his Christian heritage. Knitter believes that many spiritual and religious practitioners live in dual belonging and hybridism.<sup>67</sup>

In Sierra Leone it may be observed in recent times that people are observing and talking more about belonging to more than one religious group. This is made possible because people travel from predominantly Muslim areas to Christian regions and vice versa. In addition, there are those who have grown up practicing African traditional and indigenous religions who later become Christians. There are those who continue to practice some aspects of their former religious traditions even after they have converted to another faith.

---

<sup>67</sup>Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be A Christian*, 220-227.

This phenomenon is expressed today both in theological schools and in many spiritual arenas. However, from what I have experienced through these Sierra Leoneans spiritual and religious practices is that a majority of spiritual and religious practitioners are finding that they can be truly nourished by more than their primary religious and spiritual traditions.

## CHAPTER SIX

### SOME COMMON TRENDS

The stories shared represent some of the commonalities and differences in the life experiences of Sierra Leoneans who have migrated to the United States. These stories include religious practices, education, and the effects of war, migration, and their common life together as members of Campbell United Methodist Church. Some of these experiences have contributed to their ability to survive and flourish as each immigrant family seeks to bridge the divide between their native country and the USA.

#### **Religious Identity**

Lamin Sanneh is a Gambian who pursued higher theological education in the United Kingdom. In his book *Piety and Power*, he states clearly that the normal pattern for Sierra Leoneans is to place ethnic solidarity over other considerations. This means that people will relate to each other on the basis of mutual interest, common belief, and common needs. However, he notes that “people who are in any case drawn together by the natural ties of family, clan, tribe, language and occupation also find enduring solidarity in religion and are able for example, to appreciate their similarities as well as differences.”<sup>68</sup>

This ethnic solidarity and the role of interfaith and cultural integration are factors that help Sierra Leoneans flourish and survive as they bridge the divide between their native country and the United States. Many Sierra Leoneans are dual religious standing or backgrounds--in Islamic families but shaped by Christian practices, schools and institutions. Some Sierra Leoneans like me were born in a typical African Traditional setting but developed through Christian schools and education and later baptized in the Christian world. Sierra Leoneans see

---

<sup>68</sup>Lamin Sanneh, *Piety and Power: Muslims And Christians in West Africa* (New York, NY: Orbis, 1996), 81.

the same God (*Yahweh, Allah, Ngewoh or Yata*) in all three religions. We thus can speak in terms of a religious identity that is not singular but rather plural. Knitter suggests, “Our religious self, like our cultural or social self, is at its core and in its conduct a hybrid . . . it takes shape through an ongoing process of standing in one place and stepping into other places, of forming a sense of self and then expanding or correcting that sense as we meet other selves.”<sup>69</sup>

There is hardly a family from my interaction with Sierra Leoneans either in Sierra Leone or at Campbell United Methodist Church or in the larger Sierra Leonean community here in the United States that does not have a hybrid religious practice, life or experience. In fact, in some families, one parent may be Muslim and the other Christian.

My parents were African Traditionalists before later converting to Christianity but still they maintained some of the African Traditional religious practices. My grandparents and some uncles lived and died as Traditionalists though they practiced some Christian principles. This hybrid religious identity makes Sierra Leoneans very tolerant with each other. It is helping them greatly in their spiritual and religious practices at Campbell United Methodist Church. It is helping them survive and flourish as they bridge the divide between their native country and the United States.

### **Church Sponsored Education and Missionary Activities**

All participants mentioned receiving education through church or mission schools (e.g. Catholic, Methodist). In the 1800s, missionary activity in Sierra Leone centered on evangelism, medicine, and education.

In his book *The History of Christianity in West Africa*, O.U. Kalu explained why Christian missionaries initially failed in West Africa. He commented that the missionary

---

<sup>69</sup>Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be A Christian*, 214.

approach to evangelism failed awfully because of European ignorance of Western African cultures.<sup>70</sup> Some gain was achieved because medical care did help alleviate the suffering of the people. However, it was education of children that provided a firm foundation for Christianity. Along with literacy in Western educational approaches, it provided a pipeline for further study in institutions of higher learning in Western countries. Students would travel abroad and return to their home country to teach, practice or be innovative in their chosen fields of study.

The impact of education in Christian schools can be seen today in the commitment of Sierra Leoneans to Christian practices. Their devotion to Christian institutions such as the church, their spiritual practices, such as attending worship, reading the bible, singing songs and hymns, and engaging in other Christian practices was nurtured by early childhood education in Christian schools. It has been an enduring factor that has helped Sierra Leoneans survive and flourish as they bridge the divide between their native country and the United States.

### **Hospitality**

To say Sierra Leoneans are hospitable or have received hospitality in their migration journey is an understatement. Sierra Leonean religious and spiritual practices extol hospitality as a norm and as a virtue. Hospitality runs through three major religions, Islam, Traditional African Religions and Christianity found in Sierra Leone. Charity is one of the pillars of Islam, and Muslims are encouraged to practice it as a spiritual and religious rite, especially during Ramadan to give alms and provide for the poor. Huston Smith explains that Islam is not concerned with theoretical issues but “instead, it turns to the practical issues of what should be done about the disparity. Its answer is simple. Those who have much should help lift the burden of those who

---

<sup>70</sup>O.U. Kalu, *The History of Christianity in West Africa* (London, Great Britain: Longman, 1980), 107.

are less fortunate.”<sup>71</sup> Traditional Religions in the Sierra Leone context practice hospitality as well. For the most part, when libation ceremonies are performed, among the *Konos* for example, all are welcome irrespective of one’s economic status in the community. Christians also engage in hospitality following the commandments of Jesus: “Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”<sup>72</sup>

The call to hospitality is also expressed in the words of Acts of the Apostles, “In all things I have shown you that by working hard, you must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”<sup>73</sup>

Maruskin claims that the Bible “is based on offering hospitality to the stranger, the sojourner, the alien, the immigrant and the foreigner.”<sup>74</sup> Campbell United Methodist as a church and Sierra Leoneans as an ethnic group in the church, practice radical hospitality and witness in a context that allows them to be open to receiving as well as giving to the needs of others.

## **LGBTQ**

One of the most interesting and dynamic groups at Campbell United Methodist church is the group of people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender and Queer or called the LGBTQ community. Some Sierra Leoneans may be conservative but do take cognizance of the active participation of people who identify as LGBTQ in the church. Sierra Leoneans have come from a culture that has not taken great strides towards the inclusion of this group of people who identify as LGBTQ communities into the church or civil society. However, in the United States,

---

<sup>71</sup>Smith, *The Religions of Man*, 246.

<sup>72</sup>Luke 6:38 (NIV).

<sup>73</sup>Acts 20:35 (ESV).

<sup>74</sup>Maruskin, *Immigration and the Bible: A Guide For Radical Welcome*, 68.



people from all religious beliefs or cultural backgrounds find themselves involved in study, and conversations about human sexuality. Some Sierra Leoneans affirm their LGBTQ friends and co-workers and others continue to struggle with what LGBTQ inclusion means for Sierra Leonean culture.

Miss TN mentioned in her story that she is aware of people who identify as LGBTQ in the church and she is affirming and supportive. Encountering the LGBTQ community at Campbell has challenged Sierra Leoneans to broaden their understanding of inclusiveness and what it means to be welcomed in a reconciling congregation.

### **Migration**

One thing that runs through the stories is the idea and process of migration. I have already talked about migration and how Sierra Leoneans like the people in the Bible have stories of migrating and meeting God in their travels. Like many human stories, the Bible begins with the migration of God's people. Sierra Leoneans are no exception to this phenomenon of migration.

### **Effect of the war**

How has the war affected Sierra Leoneans spiritually? The stories themselves explained how Sierra Leoneans suffered in many ways due to the war. ZIM explained that she lost her mother because of the war. TN said that her mother and father died during the war and she left for Ghana. DK and RD had negative experiences due to the war. Some lost their homes, parents or property while others changed their religion and spiritual practices. Some Sierra Leoneans still grieve for family members lost during the war. Campbell UMC continues to ask for prayer requests for those who lost loved ones and who are still grieving.

One participant did say that he was always questioning God when his daughter joined the rebels to fight against the government forces. He said he almost lost faith in God because of the atrocities committed during the war. “Where are you God?” he states, was always one of his questions.

Some said their families never recovered from the shock of the war. Some participants said they migrated because of the devastation of the civil war. Some abandoned their families who participated negatively in the war. Family members became real enemies. Throughout the discussions, it was revealed that some people converted to Christianity because of the civil war. Some participants did not share much of their stories but mentioned that they were raised Muslim. However, because of the active part the church played in their lives, as ZIM’s story explains, in refugee camps and in neighboring countries like Guinea, the Gambia and Senegal people converted to Christianity and were baptized. Some participants who were in Sierra Leone during the civil war noted that the church played very active and positive roles in their lives during and after the war, and also in the process of emigration.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **SIERRA LEONEANS INVOLVEMENT AND MINISTRIES AT CAMPBELL UMC**

It is difficult for one to adapt to other cultures or integrate when you do not understand the values and norms of those cultures. Campbell United Methodist Church was predominantly 95 % Caucasian even in 2004. This is not the trend anymore. Sierra Leoneans form 25% to 30% of the average attendance on any given Sunday. Although Sierra Leoneans experienced culture shock as they began to attend the church, over time, their adaptation and integration into the congregation has gone more smoothly allowing for a steady growth of Sierra Leoneans at Campbell United Methodist church.

By 2010, there was a steady growth of Sierra Leoneans at Campbell United Methodist Church. Today, a visitor to Campbell United Methodist will be greeted by many Sierra Leoneans marching the isles and from every corner of the sanctuary with their colorful dresses and dashikis. (See Figures 4 & 6 for Sierra Leonean cultural attire.) Sierra Leoneans pray, provide music, sing and dance on a variety of occasions in the church. They are fully involved as liturgists, Sunday school teachers, choir directors, acolytes, ushers, greeters, sound system technicians and pastors. Their presence is also recognized in a variety of worship services and programs in the church. Through some of the following activities Sierra Leoneans serve and build bridges with the rest of the congregation and the community.

#### **Music (Vocal and Instrumental Choirs)**

These are the musical opportunities that inspire many congregants. The Chancel Choir is the main choir for the church. It provides music, hymns, anthems and other forms of music together with the organist every Sunday and on special occasions. In addition to the Chancel

Choir, the African choir, bell choirs and children's choir also supplement the worship service. Sierra Leoneans are represented in all the choirs and music functions of the church.

### **Hospitality, Prayer & Care**

The facilities at Campbell United Methodist church are attractive for multiple purposes. Sierra Leoneans actively make use of these facilities for their spiritual and religious activities. The facilities are also used as a form of hospitality to the broader Sierra Leonean community.

Sierra Leoneans are fully represented in the care ministry of the church, and they participate actively in the prayer life of the church. There is a team that takes care of the social, religious and spiritual concerns of its members in the community. This team engages in visitation in consultation with the pastors when and where needed.

### **Memorial services**

Death and life are honored very much in the Sierra Leoneans culture. The church in recent years has opened its doors to Sierra Leoneans for all spiritual and religious activities including memorial and funeral services to even people who are not members. Some Sierra Leoneans like to bury their loved ones back home in Sierra Leone when they die. As part of sharing the message of love and care to Sierra Leoneans the church helps some family members financially to offset funeral expenses.

### **United Methodist Women, "Virtuous Women" Circle**

The Campbell United Methodist Women comprise an organized community whose purpose is to know God, and to experience freedom in Jesus Christ; to develop a creative supportive fellowship, and to expand concepts of mission through participation in the global ministries of the church. The larger group meets as individual "circles" each month, and the Virtuous Women circle is a very active group in the fellowship. It contributes overall to the

richness of the United Methodist Women. Sierra Leoneans and other West African women bring their own unique backgrounds and practices to the work of this organization. The Women's Circle provides an opportunity for women to serve the church and have a sense of belonging in a United Methodist Women's organization.

### **The African Epiphany service**

This service is celebrated every first Sunday in Epiphany. It is conducted by Sierra Leoneans/ Africans who form part of the ministries of Campbell United Methodist Church

### **Bible Study& Sunday School**

Sierra Leoneans participate in the regular church Bible study and in the children and adult Sunday school. These activities provide opportunities for spiritual growth, and for sharing faith stories. Sierra Leoneans study the Bible in light of their own experience of migration, war, and the spiritual and religious practices that shaped their lives in the African context. Through all these activities they can draw on the spiritual resources that help them to survive and flourish as they bridge the divide between their native country and the United States.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS, APPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

I began this work to focus on Sierra Leoneans at Campbell UMC who had gone through the rigors of civil war and who had experience and stories about their migration, and also about hospitality and inclusion. The community at Campbell UMC was thriving because of their own religious and spiritual practices and the opportunities for their involvement in a welcoming and reconciling congregation in the United Methodist Church. The church has embraced and affirmed strangers regardless of their country of origin and above all has tried to recognize the gifts, contributions, and struggles of immigrants.

Campbell United Methodist Church is a vibrant and dynamic community with open hearts, open doors and open minds. It is a reconciling church that welcomes all irrespective of gender, sexual orientation, color or race. It is a church that has in recent years adopted a vision of a community where differences are treasured as glimpses of a creative God. At Campbell UMC, everyone is called to become in God, our creator, fully human and fully alive, and to be unafraid to cross boundaries for the sake of love.

Sierra Leoneans have made themselves comfortable with this vision in the church. They have made themselves at home in the church, flourishing and surviving as they bridge the divide between their native country and the United States. For some, like me, our resilience began in Sierra Leone and continued through circumstances of hopelessness to a fresh experience of hope and inclusion, and a living faith that “is open to new expressions and new voices.”<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Bruce Epperly, *Prayer with Process Theology: Spiritual Practices for Personal and Planetary Healing* (Anoka, MN: River Lane Press, 2017), 45.

There is a great deal that Campbell United Methodist Church, California-Nevada Annual Conference, and the larger church can learn from this group of Sierra Leonean immigrants in its midst.

In 2009, the council of Bishops in the United Methodist Church released a statement supporting the “redemptive liberation through relationship with immigrants in communities. These relationships help us to see that regardless of legal status or nationality, we are all connected through Christ to one another . . . the sojourners we are called to love are our brothers and sisters, our mothers and fathers, our sons and daughters; indeed, they are us.”<sup>76</sup>

This statement allows many immigrants to have a position or stance in the United Methodist Church. Many pastors, including myself, in the California-Nevada Conference of the United Methodist Church, are recent immigrants. This study has explored how immigrants can continue to thrive when they are received and allowed to flourish in the context of a welcoming, hospitable, and reconciling congregation. Churches can follow the example of Campbell UMC and create space for immigrants who can build ministries that demonstrate hospitality to others in their region some of whom may have similar life experiences.

Pastors, district superintendents and other church judicatories should seek out leadership among immigrants who can be trained for ministry in order to have sustainable and vibrant leadership in the future.

Immigrant communities must also be cognizant of the second generation, the children of immigrants who have different life experiences and are not sustained by the parent’s religion or spiritual practices. Some of them may need welcoming spaces to live out their religious

---

<sup>76</sup>General Board of Global Ministries, accessed October 17, 2017:<http://gbgm-umc-org>.

hybridism as they become active in service or in response to social causes and as they become future leaders.

Immigrants are also able to extend friendship and support to new immigrants and to their friends and family and in so doing continue to provide ministries of outreach and care.

Finally, this study has recognized how religious identity in Sierra Leone has allowed many to become accepting of other traditions. The fact that Sierra Leoneans may often have hybrid religious identities leads to great openness to others and allows for new ways of being in community when they migrate to places such as the United States.

In this study the Sierra Leonean community that was nurtured in the context of Campbell United Methodist Church not only received hospitality but demonstrated hospitality and care in a variety of ministries at Campbell UMC. This new faith community of faith provides a liberating and hope filled platform to give guidance and care to those who continue to face the challenges of war, economic hardship, and forced migration. Overall, it reflects the journey of individuals with hybrid religious identity living out stories and engaging in religious and spiritual practices that enable them to bridge the divide between their native country and the United States.



## **Appendix I**

### **Letter of Informed Consent Claremont School of Theology**

#### Letter of Informed Consent for Participants Able to Give Legal Consent

Daniel Sahr Gbundema is conducting a study in “The Role of Religion and Spiritual Practices in the lives of Sierra Leonean Immigrants who are now members at Campbell United Methodist Church, California.”

You are invited to participate in a research study, entitled “The Role of Religion and Spiritual Practices in the Lives of Sierra Leoneans at Campbell United Methodist Church in California.”

The study is being conducted by Daniel Gbundema, under the supervision of Dr. Lincoln E.Galloway of Claremont school of Theology, 1325 N. College Ave; Claremont CA 91711.

[lgalloway@cst.edu](mailto:lgalloway@cst.edu): Phone 909-447-2534.

The purpose of this research is to explore how Religion and Spiritual Practices help Sierra Leoneans survive and flourish as they bridge the gap between their native country and the United States. Your participation in this research study will contribute to a better understanding of how Sierra Leoneans at Campbell UMC practice their religion and Spirituality in a multi-cultural setting.

You are free to contact the investigator using the information below to discuss the study.

Address: 2312 Pauline Drive San Jose CA 95121.

Phone: 408-469-9442;

Email: [ntanehsia@gmail.com](mailto:ntanehsia@gmail.com)

## Conditions of Participation

If you agree to participate:

You must be at least 18 years old

You acknowledge that your participation is voluntary

You acknowledge that you will not be paid or compensated

## **Risks/Benefits/Confidentiality of Data**

There are no known risks to you as a result of your participation. There will be no cost for participation. Your name, email address and other personal identifiable information will be kept during the data collection phase. No personally identifiable information will be publicly released. Your personal information, if collected, will be used solely for the tracking purposes. Only Daniel Gbundema will have access to your personal information during the period of this research.

When the results of the research are published or discussed in conference, information will be included that would reveal your identity. Group photographs may be published but videos or audio- tape recording of your participation will not be preserved. Your information will be stored and destroyed when the research is completed by September 30, 2019.

## **Participation or Withdrawal**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may decline to answer any question and you have the right to withdraw from participation at any time. Withdrawal will not affect your relationship with Claremont School of Theology in any way. If you do not want to participate, you may simply stop participating.

Questions about your right as a research participant

If you have any questions about your rights or are dissatisfied at any time with any part of this study, you can contact anonymously if you wish, the chair of the institutional review Board by phone at 909-447-6344 or via email at [irb@cst.edu](mailto:irb@cst.edu):

Thank you very much for your participation in this research.

**SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT**

I have read the information provided above. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been given a copy of this form.

-----

Name of participant

-----

Signature of Participant

Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Address  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**SIGNATURE OF WITNESS**

My signature as witnessed certifies that the participants signed this consent form in my presence as his /her voluntary act and deed.

-----

Name of Witness

-----

Signature of Witness

**SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR**

Signature of Investigator

Date (same as participants)

A copy of this document will be supplied for your record.

## **Appendix II**

### **Discussion Questions**

The Discussion Questions were administered in person prior to and at the conclusion of the Research project from April 30 through August, 30 2017.

#### **Part One**

Introduction

Name/ Place of birth, region or district

Tribe

Religion, spiritual or denominational affiliation before migrating to the USA

Membership and number of years at Campbell United Methodist Church

Do you describe yourself as spiritual, religious or both and why?

#### **Part Two**

Part two centered on the stories of participants.

Ten minutes maximum was given for participants to share their stories by concentrating on but not being limited to the following areas:

Tell us about your spiritual and religious experiences while living in Sierra Leone

If you were in Sierra Leone during the civil war, how has the war affected your religious and spiritual life?

What religious or spiritual practices are important in your life?

How has your membership or involvement at Campbell UMC affected your spiritual and religious life?

What are the programs that contribute to your spiritual and religious life?

### Appendix III

<b>Maps, Figures and Tables</b>	<b>Pages</b>
Table 1: Ethnic and tribal affiliation in the four regions of Sierra Leone	49
Table 2: The Tribes, regions, and representations of participants in this project	49
Table 3: How participants self-identified	50-51
Figure 1: Interior view of the Sanctuary, Campbell UMC	4
Figure 2: Signpost of Campbell UMC	5
Figure 3: Map of Sierra Leone showing geographical regions	7
Figure 4: A cross section of Sierra Leoneans, among other West Africans, posed in their beautiful native dresses	19
Figure 5: Sierra Leoneans among other congregants feasting in the Fellowship Hall	20
Figure 6: Sierra Leoneans among other West Africans in their beautiful dassiques	21
Figure 7: Sierra Leoneans playing on drums on a Sunday	28
Figure 8: Sierra Leoneans among other West Africans singing an anthem on Epiphany Sunday 2019	29
Figure 9: Sierra Leoneans among other African choir members on Pentecost Sunday 2018	29
Figure 10: Communion Service at Campbell UMC	30
Figure 11: Baptism at Campbell UMC	31

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Benner, David. *Soulful Spirituality: Becoming Fully Alive and Deeply Human*. Brentwood, TN: Grand Rapids, 2011.

[Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blood_Diamond). Last modified March 10, 2019 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blood\\_Diamond](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blood_Diamond).

Dickson, Kwesi A. *The History and Religion of Israel: From Samuel to the Fall of the Northern Kingdom*. Dalton, London: Longman and Todd, 1967.

Epperly, Bruce G. *Praying With Process Theology: Spiritual Practices for Personal and Planetary Healing*. Anoka, MN: River Lane Press, 2017.

-----*Process Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Anoka, MN: River Lane Press, 2017.

General Board of Global Ministries <http://gbgm-umc.org>.

Grenz, Stanley J. *Created For Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Baker, MI: Grand Rapids, 1998.

Groom, Thomas H. *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 1980.

Harris, William T. and Harry Sawyer. *The Springs of Mende Belief and Conduct*. Freetown: University of Sierra Leone Press, 1968.

Idowu, Bolaji I. *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. New York: Orbis Books, 1973.

Johnson, Ben Campbell, and Andrew Dreitcer. *Beyond the Ordinary: Spirituality for Church Leaders*. Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001.

Johnson, Ben C. "Spirituality and the Later Years." *Journal of Religion and Aging* 6, 1989: 125-139.

Kalu, O. U. ed. *The History of Christianity in West Africa*. London, England: Longman, 1980.

Klein, Ralph W. "The Book of Ezra And Nehemiah: Introduction, Commentary, And Reflections." In *The Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary In Twelve Volumes*, edited by Leander E. Keck, 666-72, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999.

Knitter, Paul F. *Without Buddha I Could Not Be A Christian*, Croydon, Britain: OneWorld, 2013.

Kup, A.P. *Sierra Leone: A Concise History*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1975.

LaPierre, Lawrence L. "Development and Testing of a Spirituality Assessment Instrument." D.Min.thesis. Boston School of Theology, 1994.

Law, Eric F. *Holy Currencies: Six Blessings for Sustainable Missioner Ministries*. St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice, 2013.

Maruskin, Joan M. *Immigration and the Bible: A Guide for Radical Welcome*. New York, NY: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012.

Parachin, Janet. *Engaged Spirituality: Ten Lives of Contemplation and Action*. St Louis, MI: Chalice, 1999.

“Political Map of Sierra Leone,” “Nations Online Project, accessed March 20, 2018, [https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworldmap/sierra\\_leone\\_map2.htm](https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworldmap/sierra_leone_map2.htm).

Rogers, Frank Jr., *Practicing Compassion: A way Of Jesus*. Nashville, TN: Fresh Air, 2015.

Sanneh, Lamin. *Piety and Power: Muslims and Christians in West Africa*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1996.

--- *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*. London, United Kingdom: C. Hurst and Company, 1983.

Shorter, Aylward. *African Christian Theology: Adaptation or Incarnation?* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1977.

Smart, Joko H. M. *Sierra Leone Customary Family Law*. Freetown: Fouray Bay College, 1983.

Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1991.

--- *The Religions of Man*. New York: Harper& Row, 1986.

Novak, Philip. *The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 1994.

*Social Principles of the United Methodist Church: With official Text and Teaching Exercises, Plus Our Social Creed*. Washington DC: United Methodist Publishing House, 2009-2012.

VandeCreek, Larry, Hilary E. Bender, and Merle R. Jordan. *Research in Pastoral Care and Counseling: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*. Eugene, Oregon: WIPF& STOCK, 2008.